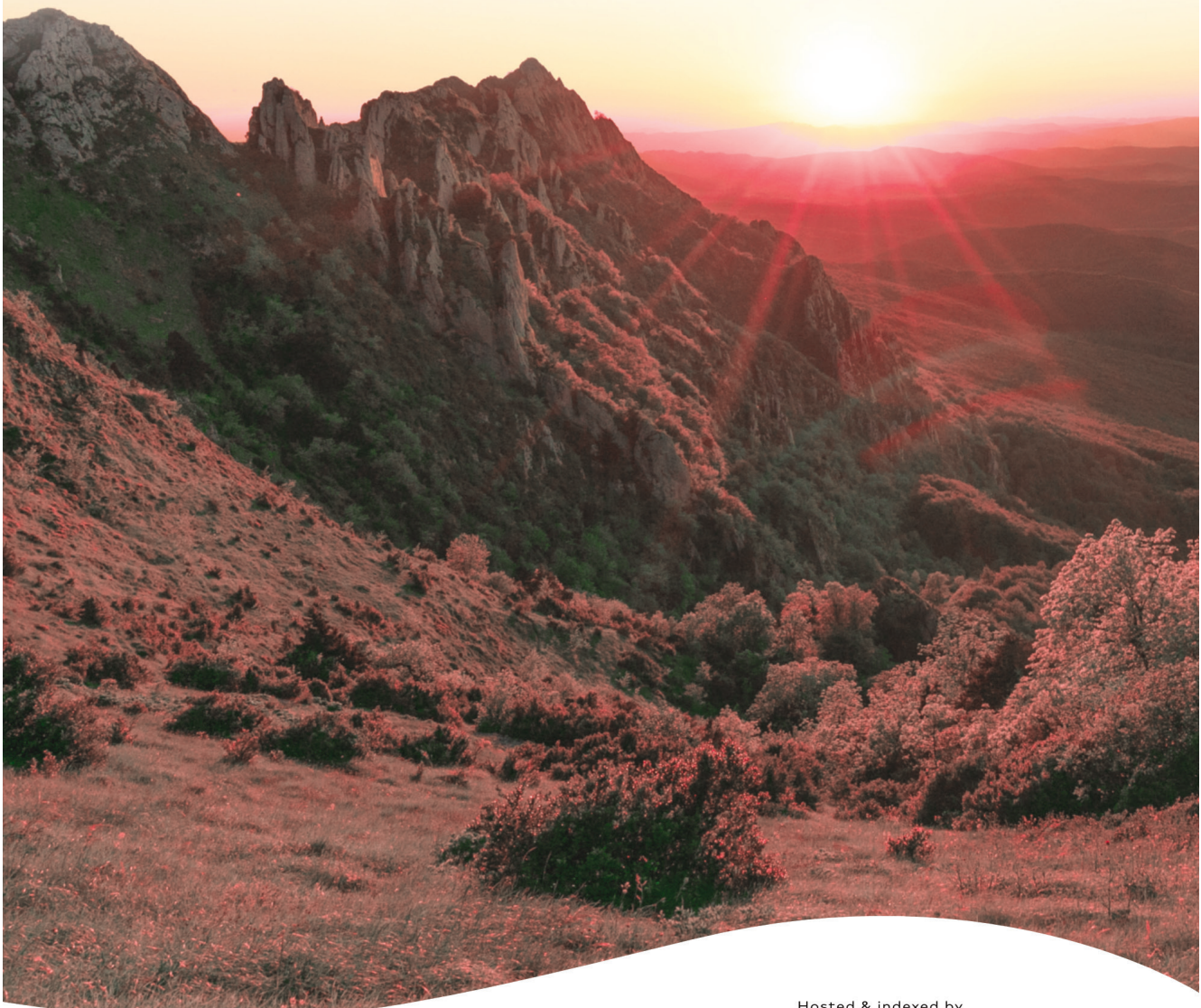


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Health marketing for substance and drug abuse prevention among the youth in Zimbabwe: Evidence and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Drug and substance abuse is a growing concern in Zimbabwe, particularly among the youth population. Factors such as peer pressure, lack of awareness about the consequences of drug abuse, and economic struggles have contributed to the rise in drug abuse. The consequences of drug abuse include various health concerns, such as cancer, heart disease, and mental health issues. The government and its partners have implemented measures such as awareness and education programs and criminalisation of drugs, but these have not been entirely effective in curbing drug abuse. To address this issue, there is a need for more extensive intervention initiatives, such as health marketing, which uses commercial marketing tools to promote healthy behaviour and positive lifestyle choices. This qualitative study investigates the feasibility of using health marketing to address drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe by examining evidence and strategies from successful health marketing campaigns. The study provides insights and recommendations for improving preventive efforts and contributes to the broader discourse on the potential of health marketing as a tool for promoting public health.

KEYWORDS: Drug abuse, substance abuse, prevention, health marketing, behaviour change, education and awareness

Introduction

Drug and substance abuse is a serious public health issue that affects millions of people worldwide. According to Makosa (2022), more than 500,000 global deaths are associated with drug and substance abuse. In Africa, estimates project a 40% surge in the number of substance users between 2018 and 2030, with the largest increase occurring in Sub-Saharan Africa (Marandure et al., 2022). Although cannabis is the most widely used drug globally, opioids are the most harmful, accounting for an estimated 71% of all deaths due to drug disorders (Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe, 2020).

Drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe has reached critical levels, with half of the youth population suspected to be abusing drugs, and other illicit substances. Commonly abused drugs and substances in Zimbabwe include alcohol, both licensed and unlicensed brews, tobacco, cannabis, crystal methamphetamine, and the non-medicinal consumption of regulated medications such as codeine-containing cough medicines and benzodiazepines (Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe, 2020; Mukwenha et al., 2022). The rise in drug and substance abuse among Zimbabwean youth has been attributed to several factors, including peer pressure, inadequate awareness of the consequences of drug abuse, stress related to unemployment, poverty, and despair due to the country's dire economic situation (Matutu & Mususa, 2019; Mukwenha et al., 2022). According to Makosa (2022), many young people in Zimbabwe turn to drugs and other harmful substances as a means of escaping the harsh realities of life in the country.

Substance and drug abuse is associated with numerous public health concerns, chief among them increases in cancer incidences, heart diseases, psychological disorders, road traffic accidents, and new HIV / AIDS infections due to reckless sexual behavior and injection use. Moreover, negative effects on physical, mental, and social well-being, such as depression, anxiety, paranoia, and hallucinations, have also been reported. According to the Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe (2020), more than 60% of patients in mental health institutions around the country are suffering from drug-related mental issues. This is of great concern, given that the mental healthcare sector in the country is already struggling with limited resources. As of 2021, the country had only 23 practising psychiatrists, serving a population of nearly 15 million people, with the majority of the psychiatrists being located in Harare (Makosa, 2022).

Regarding strategies to curb drug and substance abuse, especially among the youth, some scholars suggest that the government and its partners have not taken sufficient steps to address this issue (Matutu & Mususa, 2019). Despite attempts such as awareness and education programmes in schools and communities, and the criminalisation of drugs and other illicit substances in the country (Maraire et al., 2020; Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe, 2020), these measures have not been entirely effective since figures for drug abuse among young people in Zimbabwe continue to rise (Maraire & Chethiyar, 2020). The increase in the number of drug and substance abuse cases highlights the need for more extensive intervention initiatives to tackle this problem (Maraire et al., 2020).

There is a pressing need to expand and strengthen prevention and rehabilitation strategies implemented by the Zimbabwean government and civic organisations to curtail drug and substance abuse among the youth population. Hence, the proposal to incorporate alternative or complementary strategies that are proactive, evidence-based, and humane such as health marketing in the war against drugs in the country.

Health marketing uses commercial marketing tools, and tactics, to influence health behaviour changes, therefore, it can be a unique and innovative approach to promoting healthy behaviour, good lifestyle choices, and preventing drug, and substance abuse among the youth in Zimbabwe. In this qualitative study, a desk research design was employed to investigate the feasibility of using the health marketing approach to address drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe.

The study examined the evidence and strategies employed in successful health marketing campaigns to gain insights into the potential for using such campaigns in addressing drug abuse in the country. This study provides insights and recommendations for improving prevention efforts in Zimbabwe, and to contribute to the broader discourse on the potential of health marketing as a tool for promoting public health.

Review of Literature

Defining health marketing

The definition and extent of health marketing have been the subject of various interpretations by most scholars. It is important to acknowledge that health

marketing is a type of social marketing that utilises commercial marketing techniques to persuade a particular audience to adopt, alter, or reject behaviours that benefit individuals, groups, or society (Chichirez & Purcărea, 2018). Social marketing has been applied to tackle several problems, including climate change, environmental degradation, and health-related societal issues. However, when social marketing is employed to address health-related problems, it is referred to as health marketing (Chichirez & Purcărea, 2018; Fletcher-Brown et al., 2018; Lundgren & McMakin, 2018; Kembo & Bothma, 2023).

The Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) (2011), defines health marketing as the use of commercial marketing strategies to develop, distribute, and deliver health-related information and interventions. On the other hand, Crié and Chebat (2013) consider health marketing to be a systematic application of commercial marketing principles to the extremely vast, diverse, and intricate field of health. Despite the slight variations in the definitions, the commonality among them is that health marketing applies commercial marketing strategies to develop, disseminate, and deliver health information and interventions aimed at influencing the behaviours of a targeted audience.

2.1 Key principles of health marketing

Being a component of social marketing, health marketing is also guided by the social marketing benchmark criteria (National Social Marketing Centre, 2020) as discussed below.

Behaviour change

Health marketing interventions must identify the specific behaviour that needs to be targeted for change. This is critical since the primary objective of any social marketing related intervention is to bring about positive and voluntary behaviour change.

Customer orientation

A customer-oriented approach guarantees that the audience's interaction with the intended behaviour is thoroughly understood through formative research, frequently incorporating customers to co-create solutions.

Theory

To create effective interventions, social marketers need to use theory. Theory helps health marketers understand the factors that influence behaviour, which is necessary for successfully modifying behaviour through interventions.

Insight

Conducting customer research helps identify 'actionable insights', which are essential for developing interventions. This research provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that drive and motivate the target audience, including the individuals or groups that influence the targeted behaviour.

Exchange

The key component of any influence strategy is to establish compelling and motivating exchanges with the target audience. This involves evaluating the benefits, and costs, associated with adopting and sustaining a new behaviour, and then maximising the benefits and minimising the costs to create an appealing proposition.

Competition

Aims are to understand other behaviours, campaigns, and offerings that are vying for the target audience's time, attention, and inclination to behave in a specific manner.

Segmentation

Health marketing does not use a one size fits approach but identifies specific groups of the audience with shared characteristics and adapts interventions accordingly.

Marketing Mix

Health marketing interventions go beyond communication by employing a diverse set of methods to achieve their goals. The methods mix encompasses the marketing mix, which consists of the four core elements: product, price, promotion, and place. This ensures that health marketing practices are not limited to just communication strategies.

2.2 Current approaches to address drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, drug and substance abuse has reached unprecedented levels, with an estimated 57% of the country's youth population suspected to be engaging in drug and substance use (Matutu & Mususa, 2019; Maraire & Chethiyar, 2020). In response to the alarming prevalence of drug and illicit substance abuse in Zimbabwe, the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) has devised a National Drug Master Plan 2020 to 2025, which serves as a comprehensive strategy for addressing this problem. Through an inter-ministerial collaboration, the plan was formulated, taking into consideration existing measures aimed at curbing drug and substance abuse, to enhance and refine the nation's response to this critical public health concern (Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe, 2020).

A raft of measures have been implemented by various stakeholders, government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and community-based organisations (CBOs), aimed at ameliorating this public health issue. These measures have been designed to target both the demand and supply sides of the drug and substance abuse equation, with the overarching goal of reducing their impact within the country. Demand reduction has been centred on prevention interventions such as education and awareness in communities, schools and workplaces (Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe, 2020).

The Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), through the Departments of Drugs and Narcotics and the Community Policing and Crime Prevention, has conducted numerous day long awareness and education programmes designed to educate and create awareness on drug and substances abuse and their effects of the family, community and society at large (Makande, 2017). In addition, community awareness programmes through community leaders and community workshops have also been implemented on social and traditional media on alcohol and drug use (Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe, 2020).

As the prevalence of drug and substance abuse becomes a major concern even in secondary schools, there is an urgent need for interventions that curb its spread. Alcohol and drug usage education has been introduced into the curriculum, and several school-based and higher education awareness initiatives have been conducted (Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe, 2020). Some scholars have suggested implementing peer education and counselling activities to prevent drug and substance abuse among secondary school learners (Pinias et al., 2022). Findings from a study by Pinias et al. (2022) suggest that peer

education and counselling could significantly alleviate drug and substance abuse among secondary school learners. Nonetheless, given the reports that most young people lack adequate information on the effects of drugs and illicit substances (Nyashanu et al., 2023) and the ever-rising incidences of drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe, further efforts are needed to educate and create awareness among youth regarding drug and substance abuse.

Legislative changes have also been instituted to reduce the supply of drugs in the communities (Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe, 2020). The GoZ maintains a firm position towards drug abuse within the country, treating it as a punishable crime. This approach is designed to act as a deterrent to both current and prospective drug users. The zero-tolerance policy towards drug abuse serves as a critical measure to discourage the prevalence of drug abuse within Zimbabwe. Despite the prevailing policy and practice of getting tough on drugs, drug abuse activities in Zimbabwe continue to increase. This overreliance on repressive measures has been counterproductive, and goes against global best practices that prioritise harm reduction, treatment, and respect for human rights and dignity (Nnam et al., 2021).

Using fear of the police and arrest as a deterrent, has been effective among school-aged youth but for older youths, this approach has not been successful as many return to drug abuse following the completion of their court-mandated sentences (Maraire et al., 2020). It has been suggested that the GoZ decriminalise drug use and implement measures that facilitate access to treatment and rehabilitation for individuals who use drugs at public health centres (Maraire et al., 2020). The criminalisation of drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe has created a climate of fear among youth, preventing them from seeking help for the negative effects of drug abuse (Matutu & Mususa, 2019). Moreover, the legal enforcement or prohibition of drug use has led to the emergence of an underground drug trade that benefits many individuals who are resistant to any measures that would impede the continuation of this illicit trade (Makosa, 2020).

As such, alternative or complementary strategies that are proactive, evidence-based, and humane are necessary. Scholars (Maraire et al., 2020; Makosa, 2020) argue that greater effort is required to enhance intervention programmes aimed at preventing drug and substance abuse among the youth population in Zimbabwe. These campaigns can be designed to target specific groups or geographical locations and use language and information that can be easily

understood by the intended audience. This is where health marketing comes in as these are some of the principles of health marketing.

2.3 Evidence of effectiveness of health marketing in addressing drug and substance abuse

Health marketing has been employed in diverse settings to address a wide array of health-related problems. As previously explained, health marketing is a type of social marketing that focuses on health-related societal ills. As a result, some researchers have chosen to use social marketing in studies relating to health-related social marketing. However, for the present study, the term health marketing was used specifically. Nevertheless, because most literature refers to social marketing, it was judicious for the author to use this term when discussing the evidence for the effectiveness of health marketing in managing drug and substance abuse.

A wealth of literature exists that demonstrates the effectiveness of health-related social marketing in combating communicable and non-communicable diseases as well as promoting positive behaviours such as normal childbirth, organ donations, reducing the stigma associated with mental illness and vaccine acceptance. These health marketing interventions have also been instrumental in encouraging smoking cessation and addressing drug and substance abuse. However, the integration of health-related social marketing into national drug plans appears to be primarily a western experience and practice, as many empirical studies on the subject are found in western literature (Nnam et al., 2021). There has been relatively little scholarly attention given to the role of health related social marketing in the prevention of drug and substance abuse in Africa at large and particularly in Zimbabwe. For instance, all the studies included in the review by Stead et al. (2006) were conducted in Western countries. Nonetheless, the review discovered substantial proof suggesting that social marketing-based interventions for substance abuse were effective.

Many of the interventions that targeted smoking cessation, alcohol and drug use among young people had a positive impact in the short term (Stead et al., 2006). However, the effects were less noticeable in the medium and long term, although around half of the interventions aimed at tobacco and alcohol still exhibited some positive outcomes two or more years following the intervention (Stead et al., 2006). According to a report from the Society for the Study of

Addiction (SSA), there is a connection between social marketing and substance use control in the United States of America (USA) (Nnam et al., 2021). Findings from The Truth Initiative's anti-smoking social marketing campaign which used television and online content to alter social norms about smoking led to a 22% reduction in smoking prevalence among young people.

Also, in the USA, the success of the Meth-Free L.A. County social marketing campaign serves as further evidence of the effectiveness of health-related social marketing interventions. The evaluation of the campaign demonstrated that well-planned and targeted social marketing campaigns can assist in preventing or reducing methamphetamine use among populations at a higher risk of using.

The evaluation also showed that participants who engaged with the campaign reported more negative attitudes toward methamphetamine use, were more concerned about the impact of methamphetamine on the community, were more aware of and utilised the substance abuse helpline, considered quitting, and used methamphetamine fewer times in the past 30 days (Neffa-Creech et al., 2022).

Elsewhere, in Australia and New Zealand, there have been successful instances of using social marketing to positively influence drug use behaviour in young people. One such success story is the Smarter than Smoking (SS) campaign, established in 1995 to address the prevalent youth smoking culture in western Australia (Nnam et al., 2021). The campaign focused on harm reduction by reducing the social acceptability of smoking, emphasising the negative short-term and immediate effects of smoking, and equipping non-smokers with the skills needed to stay smoke-free. A report from New Zealand on "What Works in Social Marketing to Young People" summarised the components of the SS programme, and their significance in reducing drug use among Australian youth (Nnam et al., 2021).

Health marketing interventions have also been deployed to change smoking attitudes and behaviours in other countries such as Iran. (Findings from a study undertaken in Sirjan, Iran in 2018 to explore the influence of an education-based health marketing intervention to discourage hookah smoking among the youth showed that the campaign raised awareness and increased knowledge as well as motivated youths to abandon smoking hookah (Sadeghi et al., 2020). Additionally, results from a review that sought to explore the effectiveness of smoking cessation health marketing interventions delivered through social media indicated that these interventions could assist smokers to stop smoking

and even prevent relapse (Luo et al., 2021). However, on the African continent, most discussions about drug prevention tend to only briefly touch upon the potential of health-related social marketing in combating youth drug culture, despite its significant promise (Nnam et al., 2021). Hence, the urgent need to incorporate the approach into national drug plans.

Application of health marketing in the context of drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe

Health marketing is primarily concerned with promoting pro-health attitudes among individuals who seek to maintain their wellbeing and those who wish to regain their health (Yap et al., 2021). Consequently, health marketing could serve as an effective strategy for discouraging young people who have not yet started using drugs from engaging in drug use and motivating those who are already using to abandon this behaviour in Zimbabwe. Therefore, the implementation of a health marketing intervention anchored on the benchmark criteria may be efficacious in mitigating drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe.

Health marketing effectiveness in addressing health ills lies in the utilisation of the principles of the benchmark criteria. Applying the benchmark criteria to a drug and substance, abuse-related health marketing intervention in Zimbabwe would involve ensuring that the intervention is evidence-based, culturally appropriate, theory-driven, and tailored to the target population. Numerous studies demonstrate that health marketing interventions are more likely to achieve behaviour change when more of the benchmark criteria are used (Což & Kamin, 2020; Schmidtke et al., 2021).

The primary objective of this health marketing intervention would be the prevention of drug and substance abuse among the youth in Zimbabwe. Thus, the first stage of developing the intervention would involve identifying and defining the specific behaviours that need to be promoted to the youths. These behaviours could be the rejection of drugs and other illicit substances or modifying behaviour towards a healthier lifestyle for those already engaging in drug abuse.

Secondly, the intervention should be customer orientated. To ensure customer orientation, the intervention should focus on gaining a deep understanding of the youths' lives, behaviours, needs, and preferences. The youths themselves and local community should be actively involved in the intervention's development, rather than being treated as research subjects. Third, insight would be a crucial component of customer orientation.

Conducting customer research helps identify actionable insights, which are essential for developing interventions. Various research methods should be utilised to gain a comprehensive understanding of the local context of drug and substance abuse, including prevalence, risk factors, and attitudes. This involves consulting with key stakeholders, such as community members, health professionals, and policymakers, to gain insight into the factors that contribute to drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwean youths. The insights gained from the research should inform the development of a tailored health marketing intervention that meets the specific needs of the youth.

Fourthly, for an intervention to be effective, there should be the incorporation of theory. Theory helps health marketers understand the factors that influence behaviour, which is necessary for successfully modifying behaviour through interventions. Thus, suitable behaviour change theories should inform the design and content of the health marketing intervention. This involves using the theories to understand the factors that influence behaviour change, such as attitudes, beliefs, and perceived barriers and benefits, and designing the intervention to target these factors.

Fifth; exchange, the benefits being offered should outweigh the cost. This element can be operationalised through offering incentives or rewards to the youths for adopting healthy behaviours related to drug and substance abuse. For example, offering free health screenings or counselling services for those who quit drug and substance use or maintain sobriety for a certain period. Then the sixth element is competition. Competition analysis should be conducted to understand what would be competing for the youths' time, attention, and inclination to behave in a specific way. To minimise the impact of competition, this health marketing intervention should develop strategies that are linked to the exchange being offered.

The seventh element, segmentation, recognises the importance of tailoring interventions to a specific target audience, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach. In the case of addressing drug and substance abuse among youths in Zimbabwe, the intervention should be targeted at this demographic. Further segmentation can be done by age range, gender, education, occupation, and geographic location based on the areas with the highest prevalence of drug and substance abuse.

Lastly, the methods mix encompasses the four core elements: product, price, promotion, and place. The marketing mix in health marketing interventions extends beyond communications and includes all the 4Ps: product, price, promotion, and place. The *product* in a drug and substance abuse health marketing intervention would be the specific behaviours being promoted, such as rejecting drugs and other illicit substances or quitting drug use for those already involved. Additionally, the product can include health services that support the target audience in achieving these behaviours. The emphasis should be on highlighting the benefits of the product, such as improved health outcomes, reduced risk of harm, and enhanced quality of life. The *price* for the interventions would be the costs associated with adopting the behaviour or accessing the health service being promoted. This can include both financial and non-financial costs, such as time, effort, discomfort, or social stigma. The health marketing intervention should aim to reduce or remove these barriers by offering incentives or rewards, such as free or reduced-cost health services, or by addressing perceived barriers through targeted messaging. The *place* in a health marketing intervention refers to the location or channel through which the message is delivered. The intervention should aim to use channels that are accessible and convenient for the target population, such as social media, community events, or healthcare facilities. The intervention should also consider the physical location and design of the health service being promoted, ensuring that it is easily accessible and welcoming to all.

In health marketing interventions, *promotion* is used to 'sell' the product, price, place and benefits to the target audience, not just to communicate a message. Promotion strategies should be tailored to the specific audience and be delivered through channels that the target audience uses frequently. In the case of this drug and substance abuse intervention, the messages should be

tailored to the needs and values of the youths, using language and visuals that resonate with their attitudes and beliefs. Moreover, promotion should also address perceived barriers and benefits, using evidence-based information to support the effectiveness of the health service or behaviour being promoted.

Conclusions

In conclusion, drug and substance abuse is a significant public health concern in Zimbabwe, especially among the youth. Despite efforts by the government and its partners to address the scourge, drug abuse among young people in Zimbabwe continues to rise. The increase in the number of drug and substance abuse cases highlights the need for more extensive intervention initiatives to tackle this problem. This study has explored the feasibility of using health marketing as a tool to address drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe. By examining successful health marketing campaigns and strategies, the study provides insights and recommendations for improving prevention efforts in Zimbabwe. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to the broader discourse on the potential of health marketing as a tool for promoting public health and preventing drug and substance abuse.

Recommendations

This study highlights the necessity of developing targeted health marketing campaigns specifically tailored to address drug and substance abuse among young people in Zimbabwe. These campaigns should focus on raising awareness, changing attitudes, and promoting healthy behaviours. It is important to draw lessons from successful health marketing campaigns in other countries or regions that have effectively addressed drug abuse and to adapt and implement strategies that have proven successful. Furthermore, fostering greater partnerships and collaboration among the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community groups, and other stakeholders is crucial to maximize resources and scalability.

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