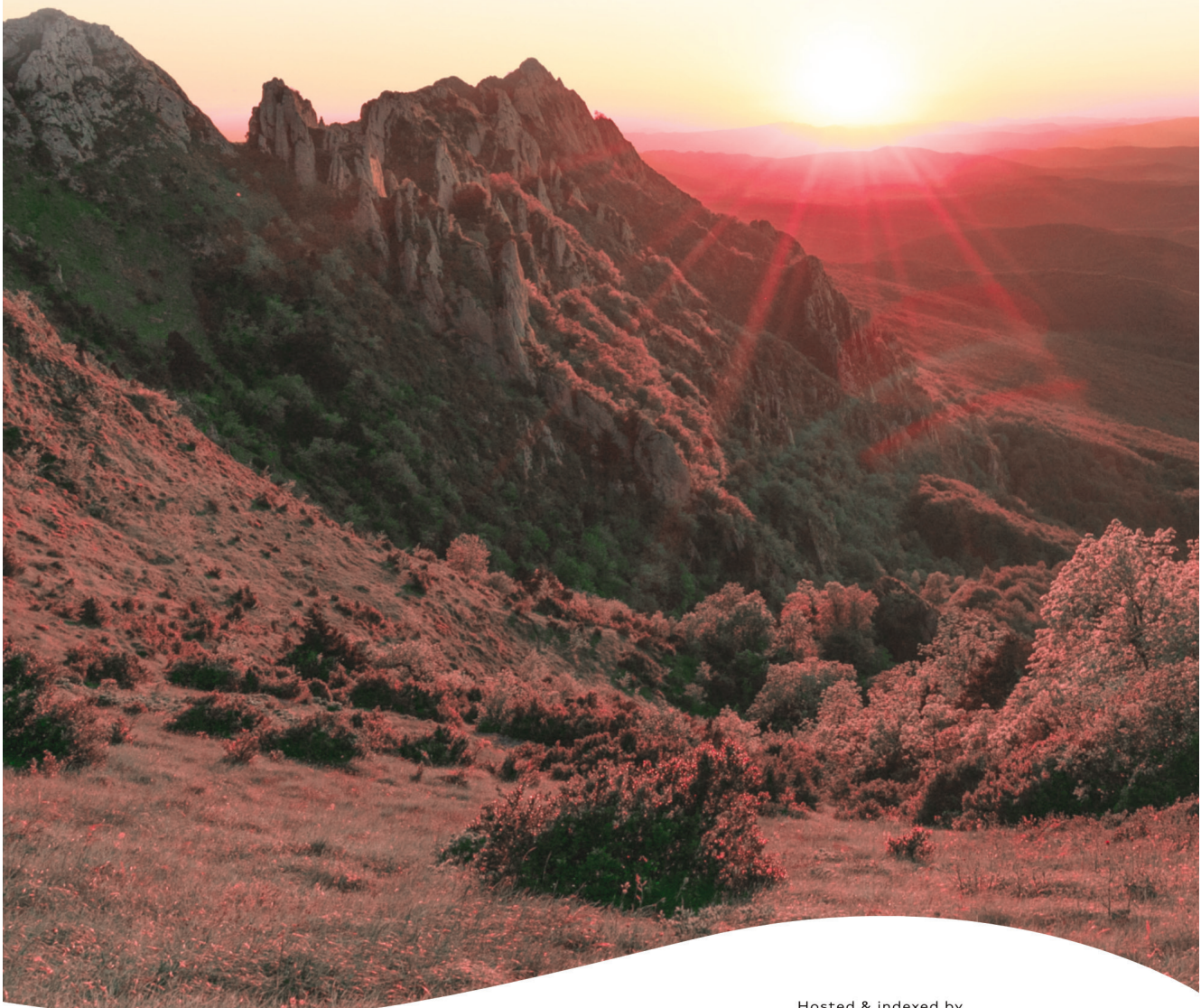


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## Perceptions of university students on the relationship between social media use and substance abuse among the youth in Zimbabwe

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### ABSTRACT

Globally, the surge of new media technologies, through social networking sites and mobile instant messaging platforms, have largely transformed the behavioural patterns of individuals and communities. Although this is a widely revered development to have occurred to humankind, particularly to countries in the global south, it has also brought with it a near 'human-crisis' in the form of increased drug and substance abuse potentially threatening the well-being of individuals and society at large. The study, on which the article is based contributes to scholarship and practice by exploring the perceptions of university students on the relationship between social media use and the nature, and extent of drug/substance use among the youth in Zimbabwe. It focused on a selected university located in Harare. The study drew inspiration from a combination of Anthony Giddens's *structuration thesis* and Pierre Bourdieu's *theory of practice*. It followed a qualitative research approach that triangulated documentary survey of related literature, and snippets of unstructured interviews, and focus group discussions. Research participants were selected through purposive and self-selection sampling techniques. One major finding of the study was that social media use created an opportunity for stimulating substance abuse especially among the youth, who are highly vulnerable to peer pressure and images of their peers, and role models having fun while taking drugs or related substances. Social media has also been instrumental in both amplification, and reduction, of drug and substance abuse. The article holds that university students perceived both social media use and substance use to be determinist and agentive. The paper, concludes that their relationship is largely bidirectional with each capable of changing the direction of influence.

**Keywords:** addiction, drug abuse, social media, structuration, substance abuse

## **Introduction**

This article explores the perceptions of university students on the relationship between social media use and substance abuse (or misuse) among the youth in Zimbabwe. Substance use, mainly for commercial, medical, recreational and cultural purposes, pervade the history of humanity (Nelson, 2012). However, the illicit trading and consumption of drugs, and related substances, in recent times, especially among the youth have triggered much concern among families, governments and civil society. The problematic substance use has become a global panic, attracting a lot of interest from scholars, and social work practitioners. In particular, new media technologies via social networking sites, and mobile instant messaging platforms, have largely transformed the behavioural patterns of individuals and communities.

## **Background**

Global social media use grew from 1 million monthly active users in 2004 to over 3.6 billion in 2020, with this figure projected to increase to almost 4.4 billion by 2025 (Rutherford, 2022). Illicit drug use is the highest among 18–25 year olds, an age range shared by most active users of internet/social media (SM) (Kazemi, Borsari, Levine & Dooley, 2017), and largely the dominant group in the University studied.

The large public presence of substance related social media content might have negative influences on attitudes, behaviours and risk perceptions relating to substance use, particularly among adolescents, and young adults, who are the primary users of social media. Furthermore, the increase in social media use has rendered ineffective any possible surveillance systems by authorities.

In Zimbabwe, Matutu and Mususa's (2019) study findings indicate that prevalence of drug abuse was at 57% among young people, and the most commonly abused drugs and substances were marijuana and alcohol. More recently, there has been an increase in the use of e-cigarettes, psychostimulant, stimulant, inhalant and novel psychoactive substances (Rutherford, 2022). Other usually abused drugs and substances among the youth in Zimbabwe include sedative tablets, alcohol, heroin, tobacco, cigarettes, *mutoriro*, *hashish* (charas), crystalmeth, glue, and cocaine.

**I**n this article, social media platforms refer to online web-or application-based platforms that allow users to generate content and interact via 'liking', comment or messaging features and surfing blogs. These include but not limited to Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter. Although it is a widely revered development to have occurred to humankind, particularly to countries in the global south, it has also co-evolved with a near 'human-crisis' in the form of drug and substance abuse (DSA) potentially threatening the well-being of individuals and society at large.

**D**rug and substance abuse is any harmful intake of drugs in ways or quantities hazardous to users or people around them, or both. Excessive drug/substance consumption may lead to substance dependence and consequently addiction. According to Becker and Hu (2008), drug abuse occurs in three stages, first, acquisition or initiation of drug-taking, during which an individual acquires drugs, secondly, an escalation of use when the individual begins to use drugs on a large scale. When this persists, it leads to addiction, during which time the individual begins to depend on drugs, thirdly and finally, relapse because of abstinence.

**W**hile there is evidence of scholarship on the influence of social media on religiosity, political participation and consumer behaviour, similar works assessing the perceived influence of social media on problematic substance use among the youth particularly from the perspective of university students have been limited and if ever these exist, they have been mainly institutional and journalistic. In addition, most of the studies rely on the experiences of the global north.

**A**lthough there seems to be some convergence in both public and academic discourse on the symbiotic relationship between digital technology and, substance abuse and disorder, empirical evidence has not been conclusive regarding the direction of association igniting fervent interest in the subject. Furthermore, the excessive consumption of alcohol and (ab)use of drugs such as marijuana and cocaine by the youth especially in universities and colleges has been a worrying trend with potential to threaten the national development agendas. In spite of the perceived risks and perceived disapproval associated with drug and substance abuse, and disorders, at both community and national level, the scourge has remained a recalcitrant problem to social work practice.

**D**rug and substance abuse have recently attracted intense institutional, public, political and media attention. Digital technology platforms such as Facebook,

Twitter, Tiktok, WhatsApp and Youtube have compounded the situation as both proximal factors and enablers to the scourge. Following online substance-related content by college students can be regarded as cyber-deviance (Inderbitzin, Bates & Gainey, 2017), triggered by activating proximal factors. Proximal factors include deviant peers, family, neighbourhoods that individuals have direct contact (Vaughn, 2013). The problem with drug and substance abuse, and problematic social media use, has been well documented in both scholarly and institutional work. In spite of this, there has not been any consensus in research regarding the associative relationship between social media and DSA among the youth. There is a perspective that views both DSA and social media use as largely agentive while another view points to an outcome of structural conditioning in which the individual is passive and constrained. Social media are highly personalised spaces and their effects depend on how people make use of them (Knoll, Matthes & Heiss, 2020). This article contributes to the debate by analysing the perceptions of university students on the influence of social media on the nature and extent of drug/substance among the youth in Zimbabwe.

The rest of the article follows five thematic parts. Firstly, the theoretical orientation of the study is provided. Secondly, the article presents the methodology. Thirdly, it discusses the perceived motivations for DSA and social media use. Fourthly, the interface between gender, social media and substance use is considered. Finally, the article examines the relationship between social media use and, drug and substance use).

### **Theoretical Orientation**

The article combines Anthony Giddens' (1984), *structuration theory* and Pierre Bourdieu's (1990, 1992) *theory of practice*. According to the structuration theory, structure and agency (action) are necessarily related and not polar opposites (Giddens & Sutton, 2013; Jones & Karsten, 2008). People actively make and remake social structure during the course of their everyday activities. For example, with respect to this study, while the emergence of social media has transformed social interaction, actors have always given force and content to the structure of interactions on platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. Exposure to social media and, drug and substance use is both agentive and accidental. Thus, social media use and substance abuse are socially constructed, and are constantly in the process of structuration. Structuration always presumes the 'duality of structure' in which all social action presumes

the existence of structure, but at the same time, structure presumes action because 'structure' depends on regularities of human behaviour (Giddens & Sutton, 2013, p. 90). Consistent with the structuration theory, the study explored how the interplay of structure and agency influenced the perceived relationship between social media use and problematic substance use.

To complement Giddens's thesis, the article deploys Bourdieu's theory of practice in particular the concepts of habitus, field and capital. In this regard:

*Conditions associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable, dispositions ... principles which generate and organise practices and representations (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53).*

The habitus is thus not wholly structured, though it remains strongly influenced by historical, social and cultural contexts. To illustrate the importance of the concept of habitus to understanding substance abuse, (Parkin, 2013) demonstrates how some neighbourhoods or public settings are used for the preparation and administration of illicit drugs. Habitus develops through the internalization of the objective structures of the environment in the form of practices. It forms a durable generative principle that guides the actor in his or her choices between alternatives that are present in a certain conjuncture (Siisiainen, 2000). Consistent with the Bourdieusian thesis, substance and social media use are regarded fields because they are sites of social action and power struggles over capitals with specific norms and rules, where broader social structures are objectified. Fields are 'relatively autonomous', subsumed by the social field which is in turn subsumed by the field of power (O'Hara, 2000). The concepts of habitus and field, illustrate that although individuals make independent choices regarding why, when and how to use a social media platform or manage own substance use, the capacity to navigate the terrains depends on one's previous lived experience, status and position within the structures and power relations. In Bourdieu's theory of practice, the concepts of cultural and social capital are of significance to theorising of social media and substance use. Findings of the Facebook crawl illustrate the persistence of the structure and autonomy of the field of culture as depicted by Bourdieu (Lindell, 2017). Individuals are embedded in a web of social relations and this social structure guides their decisions (Maertz & Griffeth, 2004, cited in Unlu, 2009, p. 30). Within the social structure, individuals invest in social capital by

spending time and energy, interacting, and forming networks with other people (Lundborg, 2006). Parents, peer groups, and community are the main social structures in which youth spend most of their time. However, the characteristics of these groups have different impacts on youth behaviour.

## **Methodology**

The study on which this article is based explored the perceptions of university students on the relationship between social media use and substance abuse or misuse among the youth in Zimbabwe. Primary data was collected from undergraduate students of a selected university based in Harare between January and February 2023. The study was anchored on the interpretivist paradigm. Its design relied on a triangulation of systematic survey of scholarly works and evidence based institutional reports, and snippets of ethnographic data.

Data collection methods included unstructured face-to-face and virtual interviews, and an on-site focus group discussion session. Key informants were selected through purposive sampling technique while self-selection strategy was used to select interview and focus group discussion participants. All the participants were drawn from a university based in Harare. Ultimately, six key informants were identified on the basis of their willingness to provide information based on their knowledge and experience. Those selected were expected to be proficient and well-informed about the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011).

The key informants comprised two lecturers (male and female); two student peer educators (male and female), campus-based counsellor and social worker. Interviewees were invited through a notice posted via group E-mail and WhatsApp platforms with details of the study, and those interested were advised to respond. The target sample size for interviews was between fifteen and twenty while five to eight members were considered sufficient for the focus group discussion. Focus group discussion participants selected through invitation and drawn from those who had participated in the interviews. At the end of each interview session, the researcher had asked participants if they were willing to be part of the focus group session.

The responses to both interview and focus group invitations was overwhelming. In the end, 18 participants were interviewed and six members attended the focus group discussion. In adopting such a miniature sample, the researchers recognised that it is not the number that provides the basis for the truth; rather, it regards objectives being clear, systematic and consistent in observation, analysis and interpretation.

Four main themes anchored the direction and content of the interviews and focus group discussions; students' perceptions on motivations for DSA, motivations for social media use, gender and substance abuse, and the relationship between social media use and substance abuse. Data was analysed using a thematic illustrative model in particular 'pattern matching'. Since the study was anchored on theoretical frameworks, pattern matching of interview and focus group data was important to establish the overall pattern of results and the degree to which a pattern matches the predicted one (Yin, 2009). The 'illustrative method' anchors or illustrates theoretical concepts with empirical evidence. It applies theory to a social setting and organises data based on theory (Neuman, 2013, p. 489).

The data collection and article development followed conventional research ethics. Participation was voluntary and mainly by self-selection, and building confidence among the participants. With the consent of the participants, the focus group discussion session was audio-recorder to allow verbatim data recording and ensuring rigor. Throughout the recording and development of the article, participants were anonymised. In spite of this, one limitation of the study was solely using a qualitative approach based on a very small sample. This could have been mitigated by the adoption of quantitative analyses using a larger sample to include more than one university, widening the scope to perceptions and lived experiences of substance users and the public

## Findings

### *Perceived motivations for drug and substance abuse*

Exploring motivations for problematic substance use among the youth matter for a better understanding of social media use. However, understanding the motivations is not a simple endeavour, given that this involves a complex process that includes several interacting factors (Castro & Gildar, 2013; Moyo, 2020). What causes individuals to develop problematic substance use varies with each individual (Nelson, 2012). These studies found out various drivers of drug and



substance abuse by the youth that include individual and family, social context, peer approval, community and environmental risk factors. Taylor (2010) defines a risk factor as a variable that increases the likelihood that a person will initiate the use of a substance such as marijuana. At an individual level, the decision to consume a particular substance is both rational and irrational. As stated by some key informants (Ki):

*Youths, especially adolescents, and those in universities, take drugs as stress depressants and just for enjoyment. (Ki1)*

*...however, others get into drug and substance abuse through external influences including poverty, peer and role models. (Ki2)*

*Some start as trading agents to cope with economic hardships but end up consuming as well. (Ki3)*

The responses resonate with Gunning et al. (2009, cited in Bender, Tripodi, Sarteschi & Vaughn, 2013, p. 186) observation that peer substance abuse was the strongest predictor of alcohol (b)use. For example, the youths in universities and neighbourhoods influence each other in taking alcohol and skin lightening products perceived to enhance personal beauty and attraction. This supports the findings of Unlu's (2009) study that investigated the structural relationship between social capital in the form of peer influence, and youth substance use, in the United States. It is postulated that children with more substance-using friends, are more likely to use substances themselves. Substance users provide direct access to substances, act as role model, and affect friends' behavior by enforcing group norms (Unlu, 2009. p. 87). Thus, DSA is not necessarily voluntary as individuals are also influenced by social structures. Risk factors or drivers of DSA include associating with deviant peers, poor academic performance and approval of drug use that is communicated from significant others within social environments (Taylor, 2010).

In some cases, new university students fail to adapt to the usually demanding academic tasks and engage in "risky" coping strategies. As one informant confirmed:

*Many new comers to university struggle to adjust to the new environment particularly poor academic performance especially in areas perceived to be challenging like engineering and natural sciences.*

**A**s a coping strategy, the youths take alcohol and other related stimulants and depressants substances. In the end, this ‘escapist’ form of substance use (Martin, Tuch & Roman, 2003, cited in Castro & Gildar, 2013, p. 147) may lead to substance dependence and finally addiction. This behaviour is prevalent among both males and female youths. The new comers go through a social learning process (differential association, personal definitions, differential reinforcement and punishment, imitation and modelling) that initiate them into permanent membership of the deviant subculture (Lanza-Kaduce, Capece & Alden, 2006). Thus, substance use, abuse and related addictive behaviours are influenced by culture within three domains; individual, interpersonal and environmental.

**F**urthermore, prominent role models such as artists, musicians and movie stars can inspire the youths to take or desist from drugs. Inspiration is an important function of role models when individuals perceive themselves as obliged to be similar to and imitate their role models. People who venerate these celebrities may, then decide to imitate them. Youth tend to take after the actions of their elders, whether they are teachers, parents, or celebrities (<https://www.bluecrestrc.com>). This supports Costello and Ramo (2017) observation that celebrities and others often glorified rampant use of substances on social media. It also confirms Moyo’s (2020) views that the majority of youths in universities imitate celebrities especially those who use chemicals or take drugs on television and in the movies. In the Zimbabwean context, a case in point is that of visiting internationally renowned artists who allegedly smoke what is usually suspected to be cannabis, marijuana, weed or *mbanje* (a vernacular equivalent), while performing on stage. A case in point is of one artist who did as such at a concert in Harare in 2022. The interplay of the structural, environmental and personal variables is predictive of both social media and substance use. This is consistent with the main propositions of Bourdieu’s structural conditioning and Giddens’s structuration thesis.

**E**nvironmental risk factors that include economic stress, built environment and neighbourhoods influence supply and demand of illicit drugs and substances (Inderbitzin, et al. 2017; Nelson, 2012; Taylor, 2010). Since the turn of the new millennium, Zimbabwe has witnessed unprecedented economic downturn characterised by hyperinflation and unemployment resulting in the mushrooming of slums and backyard irregular structures in many cities. This co-evolved with the establishment of new and multi-campus universities creating an acute shortage of on-campus accommodation making students vulnerable as they end up residing in cheap, but crowded and drug using environments

(Logan, 2003; Parkin, 2013). In these neighbourhoods, new values, norms and behaviours are promoted. In cities like Bulawayo and Harare, suburbs known for facilitating illicit trading in prohibited drugs and substances also tend to attract many economically disadvantaged students. This is in agreement with other researches elsewhere (Nelson, 2012; Parkin, 2013), who found out that young people from deprived families and communities have a number of risk factors working against them, and more likely to develop problematic substance use. Risk factors are associated with negative behaviours or experiences in each of these domains, while protective factors perceived useful or positive behaviours, experiences and support in each of these domains (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Risk and protective factors for problematic substance abuse**

<b>Risk factor</b>	<b>Domain</b>	<b>Protective factors</b>
Early aggressive behaviour	Individual	Self-control
Poor social skills	Individual	Positive relationships
Lack of parental supervision	Family	Parental supervision
Substance use	Peer	Academic achievement
Substances easily available	School	Substances difficult to get
Poverty	Community	Strong sense of positive community

Source: American Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), (2008, cited in Nelson, 2012, p. 17)

During the Covid-19 pandemic induced national lock-downs, students spent more time in neighbourhoods than before creating more opportunities to interact with drug peddlers. This is supported by evidence suggesting a rise in substance abuse due to the Covid-19 pandemic and resultant lockdowns, being labelled an ‘impending public health disaster.’ The ease of availability of substances (cf. Table 1), together with a lack of recreational activities for young people during lockdowns have both been cited as potential reasons for the increase (Mukwenha et al., 2021). Young people, including students, took advantage of the Covid-19-lockdowns to smuggle prohibited drugs and substances into homes and neighbourhoods under the pretext making preventive concoctions against the Covid-19 virus. In fact, during the same period, social media was also awash with online awareness postings on the prevention and management of the pandemic.

Some individuals opt for drugs as a way of dealing with acculturative stress, depending on the ecological environment, and the available opportunities and barriers under which change occurs. Acculturative stress occurs when a person faces threats to their well-being with the new community or environment (Farver, Narang & Bhadha, 2002, cited in Castro & Gildar, 2013, p. 146). Such neighbourhoods, which are often working distances from universities and colleges, influence the development of sub-cultures that tend to neutralise and naturalise DSA.

Any surveillance and censorship efforts against problematic substance trading, and use, have not been effective because users do not only depend on the medically prescribed drugs but traditional and indigenous ones widely available in the neighbourhoods. The different motivations determine the types of drugs and substances abused. Similarly, the perceived and actual effects of use influence preferences for particular drugs and substances. However, as shown in Table 1, types of DSA are contingent on the available risk and protective factors. Users' perceptions on how the substance would affect them matter. In universities and colleges, deviant peers, physical and political environment who facilitate the availability of the drug and create opportunities for problematic substance use. From a student perspective, drug use, abuse and dependence may not necessarily be 'a bad thing', as some drugs are regarded effective psychoactive and performance enhancing substances, stress and trauma depressants.

### *Perceived motivations for drugs and social media use*

In the previous section, the article explored the perceived motivations for problematic drug and substance use among the youth. When asked about their perceptions on the motivations for social media use, the majority of key informants support previous studies showing that the fundamental motives for media use, in the context of drugs and substance abuse, included fulfilling the need for information, personal identity, entertainment and social interaction (Knoll et al., 2020; Nelson, 2012). As stated by one participant:

*Social media sites have often served as platforms for disseminating information about substance availability. WhatsApp postings during weekends such as "if you need to relax, feel high...inbox me pliz" are quite common among university students irrespective of gender.*

It is interesting to note that pursuance of ‘personal identity’ and ‘entertainment’ are the perceived lead motivators for the both social media use and problematic substance abuse. This is supported by Nhunzvi, Galvaan and Peters’s (2019) study on Zimbabwean men recovering from substance abuse, which regarded substance abuse an ‘occupation’, pleasurable act of spending one’s time and an instrument for socialisation, and seeking identity. Thus, the motivations for social media use and substance abuse among the youth vacillate between the personal and situational dispositions. This is consistent with the structuration theory that privileges the interplay of structure and agency. However, this is also partly a post-structural discursive construction, as the language used to disseminate the messages on social media is more understood by insiders than outsiders.

Situational dispositions refer to all societal, social, and technological configurations a person is embedded in when choosing means of gratification (Lin, 1993, cited in Knoll et al. 2020, p. 139). Thus, although social media can be agentic, structurally conditioned and situationally predisposed, it might lead to accidental exposure. In essence, the motives for both social media use and substance (mis)use lie at the interaction of structural conditioning and human agency. Although the users’ motivations for following interactions or profiles of celebrities on a specific social media site may not be explicit, reliving or imitating such behaviours by way of solidarist or supportive postings either on Twitter or Facebook can be perceived to be a form of intentional identity disclosure.

Social media use is also politically motivated. Since social media is embedded in people’s daily routines; they can facilitate unintentional encounters with content among users who may ordinarily not be interested in such material. Thus, some university youths may seek political information on social media platforms, in the process become accidentally or unintentionally exposed to networks of politically motivated drug peddlers. Although relatively unorganised, informal talk about issues such substance use and politics on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp platforms tend to mobilise users for off-line participation.

The patterns of online participation reflect both the ability to participate through knowledge and networks or acquaintances, and also cognitive mobilization such as political interest and political efficacy that compel someone who is able to engage to actually participate (Rottinghaus & Escher, 2020). Participants indicated cases of politicians (ab)using youth under the influence of illicit

drugs and substances to commit violent acts against political opponents. Thus, they perceive strong association between social media, substance (mis)use and political participation. As confirmed by one key informant;

*Even during elections to select student leaders, alcohol consumption tends to be on the increase. You cannot expect to win without buying a six-pack!*

However, opportunities for participation are not equal as personalised invitations to participate depend on one's social and economic status. Political use of social media is also largely determined by demographics and predispositions (Knoll et al., 2020). Hence, some authors (Stark, 2019, Steinbrecher, 2009; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018, all cited in Rottinghaus & Escher 2020, p. 265) have found online political participation differentially gendered. Although in the Zimbabwean context, men tended to be more interested in engaging in digitally networked political participation and less interested in health and consumerist matters than women did; evidence from this study shows that female university youths, though on a smaller scale, are equally politically active. According to the study participants, participation on social media platforms such as Facebook, where actor identities can be anonymised, provide individuals space to:

*...engage on seemingly sensitive subjects as 'benefits of cannabis or marijuana' and "sex performance enhancing substances.*

### ***Gender, social media and substance use***

Consumption of drugs and substances is structurally and symbolically shaped. Drugs and substances are gendered, age differentiated and racialized within and beyond the context of their consumption (Moore & Measham, 2013; Nelson, 2012). Among young women, social media has played an enabler role. For example, Ohannessian, Vannucci, Flannery and Khan (2017) study on "social media use and substance use during emerging adulthood in the United States", examined the relationship between daily time spent using social media and substance use. The study found out a significant gender - social media use interaction, revealing that greater daily social media use was significantly related to more frequent drug use for females but not for males. Although social media platforms such as twitter, blogs, Facebook and WhatsApp disseminate information about the dangers of illicit use of drugs and substances, they serve as instruments for neutralization and naturalization of stigmatization and criminalisation perpetrated by both media, public and the state. The findings corroborate those by Brown (2013) in a related study focusing on young women, it was noted that technology and social media played an instrumental role in

documenting and celebrating precisely what was regrettable in both official and public domain. As one participant stated:

*Some 'feel good' not only by seeing photos or videos of excessive drunkenness or intoxication of colleagues on social media but go as far as creating WhatsApp status photos of drunken celebrities.*

The above supports other researches on young women drinking practices, which demonstrate that acting 'inappropriately' was one of the most pleasurable aspects of consuming alcohol (Cullen, 2011; Sheehan & Ridge, 2001; Waitt, et al., 2001, all cited in Brown, 2013, p. 68). For example, although tobacco smoking is widely considered inappropriate to a conventional African girl child, university students, regardless of gender perceptions, it a stimulant that reduces sleep particularly during examination periods. This reinforces Nelson (2012) observation that substances like cigarettes or cigars keep users awake, make users feel more energised, alert and gives them a sense of well-being. Informal talks on WhatsApp groups and Facebook tend to glamorise the practices. However, the practice becomes problematic when it leads to dependence and consequently addiction.

Social media technologies collapse contexts, and boundaries, especially those created along gender lines. They tend to collapse multiple contexts, and thus, bringing together distinct audiences across the socio-political, economic, religious and cultural divide. This context collapse allows "users to quickly diffuse information across their entire network and facilitate interaction across diverse groups of individuals who would otherwise be unlikely to communicate" (Vitak, 2012, p. 451).

Social media effectively facilitates debates about problematic substance use allowing unrestricted participation by all ages, classes and gender. The majority of students perceive that many women who take to "binge" drinking while at college will be taking pleasure in disrupting the gender- stereotyping within the wider society. Consequently, the youths, especially female students, tend to find gratification in social interactions and engagement, perceived as resistant to established patriarchal and masculinist social order (Moore & Measham, 2013).

As earlier indicated, in such a case, social media becomes a form of information activism" (Halupka, 2016), that breaks the traditional political orientation boundaries and collapses contexts (Boyd, 2006; Vitak, 2012). This is in agreement with Knoll et al.,'s (2020) argument that media use is subject to the influence of prior existing motives (pre-exposure) and effected when exposed to media

content. Thus, some youths may still take drugs even in the absence of social media.

**S**ocial media may not necessarily predict one's propensity to take drugs and substances but potentially amplifies an already existing desire. Although female students can be exposed off-line to skin lightening products, the availability of social media sites facilitate easy access to substances. It is believed that:

*An individual cannot become substance dependent if the drug either does not exist or is unavailable. For example, if an individual were alone on an uncharted island there would be no possibility of becoming addicted to alcohol or drugs (Vaughn, 2013, p. 42).*

**I**n spite of awareness programmes rolled out in communities, university and national level, to discourage the use of such substances the trend has not been reversed due to social media counter-strategies.

**I**n addition, many youths in universities may already have been exposed to experimentation, and use of illicit drugs in their teens at high school, and neighbourhoods; as such should not be always treated as victims of illicit drug use (Moore & Measham, 2013). As Bourdieu posited, in the concept of habitus, actors are structurally conditioned and tend to behave according to 'past experiences' and can be "modified by new experiences" (Bourdieu, 1992 p. 59). Early experiences are of great importance since the habitus tends to ensure its own constancy and its defence against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information. Produced dispositions are "durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions" (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 60). Overall, the consumption of drugs and substances is not gender neutral, as such, the majority of study participants perceived that some female youths may have taken feminism too far by taking to illicit drugs and binge drinking as radical resistance to alleged symbolic violence perpetrated by stigmatisation and criminalisation. Such actors are presented in literature as finding exhilaration, pleasure and gratification in problematic substance use and take such issues to social media platforms.

### *Relationship between social media use and substance abuse*

**T**he relationship between the nature and extent of social media, drugs and substance abuse by youths, as viewed and perceived by university students, matters for the understanding of the phenomenon, particularly with respect



to designing of policy interventions at both institutional and national level. Students are part of the environment and networks in which DSA occurs, but whose experience and knowledge of the phenomenon greatly influence their perceptions and values. University students play various roles in the management of DSA notably as campus health promoters, peer educators, counsellors, and to a lesser extent, traders of illicit drugs and substances. As revealed by Adejoh, Adisa, Onome, Anyimukwu and Olorunlana's (2020) study in Lagos (Nigeria), social media platforms facilitate online illicit drug markets. However, reports on use of social media as a strategy for selling drugs, with hashtags facilitating the process of pairing buyers and sellers, are not new (Costello & Ramo, 2017). Others may have been victims and survivors of DSA. This agrees with Nelson's (2012, p. 26) observation that: "understanding public perceptions of problematic substance users are socially constructed by the history enabling social workers to be better at working anti-oppressively and in ant-discriminatory way." All the roles matter for the effective management of specialised youth substance services available on campus. However, student perceptions may not necessarily tally with those of the actors and authorities.

The assessment, and perceptions, of the actors depend on the existential reality that they experience while that of outsiders depend on actual and perceived knowledge. Students' perceptions influence their attitudes towards drug and substance users, and in the end, behaviour. Consequently, they tend to either stigmatise or normalise the problematic substance use and subsequently influence their social media actions and immediate reactions when unintentionally exposed to photos, stories and video posted on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Given that online platforms continue to increase in popularity with the participation of adolescents and young adults, it is likely that exposure to certain high-risk publicly available content, depicting substance (ab)use, may negatively influence the youths (Rutherford, 2022). However, this study did not ascertain the actual substance use-orientation of the research participants on ethical grounds given the hiddenness of the phenomenon. Even Facebook and WhatsApp profile photos and stati depicting cannabis, marijuana, or dope only told part of the problematic substance use story. As indicated by one key informant:

*You need to be part of them to understand the full picture. A WhatsApp advert posting such as "fresh onions...hurry up" actually tells a different story!*

The submission supports Barry et al.'s (2016) who observed how tobacco, electronic cigarettes, and alcohol had been integrated into marketing strategies.

This also exemplifies how substance users used ‘their own language’ as a way of countering any possible surveillance by authorities. In the Zimbabwean context, Chingono (2021), observed the same when investigation on the use of methamphetamine (commonly known as crystal meth) particularly among the youths in a selected high-density suburb in Harare. Ultimately, it all resonates with Bourdieu’s (1992) theory of practice that emphasizes an individual’s everyday practices as not being always explicit and mediated by language, but instead, are often tacit and embodied (Oerther & Oerther, 2017). This explains the reasons for this study investigating the perceived association between social media, and substance abuse.

There are similarities between drugs, substance abuse and social media use. Although this study did not establish a causal association between them, key informant interviews and focus group discussions revealed that the characteristics of substance abuse, particularly addicts, tended to resemble those of excessive social media users. Hence, participants agreed that:

*Excessive social media users and drug addicts experience similar pleasures, restlessness, loss of control and disorders. They both make irrational decisions.*

The research participants perceived users tended to experience similar post-use effects. According to Meshi et al., (2019) social media use is comparable to drug addiction. Just like drugs, social media use was reportedly toxic as well. The study concluded that drug addicts and pathological gamblers, and excessive social media users experienced the same deficiency in decision-making. As reinforced by one interviewee:

*When one starts enjoying stories, videos and conversations on Phoenix, WhatsApp, TikTok and Facebook there is no stopping. Zvese zvinodhaka! (They are all equally intoxicating).*

The findings support other studies elsewhere (Brown, 2013; Hormes, Kearns & Timko, 2014; Rutherford et al., 2022) which confirm that users with excessive and disordered online social networking use were more likely to have problematic substance use. The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) also notes the increasing evidence of a link between exposure to social media and drug abuse, which disproportionately affects young people, the main users of social media platforms, and age groups with relatively high rates of drug abuse (UN, 2022). In the Zimbabwean context, Matutu and Mususa (2019) and Nhunzvi, Galvaan and Peters (2017) demonstrated the symbiotic association between drug, substance abuse and social media use. There was an increase in substance-related content on social media that promoted engagement with

substance use. High frequency viewers also had increased perceptions of social media use acceptability and greater likelihood to initiate substance use (Vogel et al., 2021, cited in Rutherford, et al., 2022, p. 207). Excessive exposure to social media and substance abuse conditions users into dependence and consequently leading to addiction.

## **Conclusions**

**T**he article explored the perceptions of selected university students on the relationship between social media use, drugs and substance abuse among the youths in Zimbabwe. One of the major findings of the study was that, social media was perceived as capable of creating opportunities for stimulating substance abuse especially among the youths, who are highly vulnerable to peer pressure, images of their peers and role models having fun while taking drugs or related substances. The study also established that social media is not necessarily bad for substance use. It functions as a stimulant, and instrument for both productive and problematic substance use.

**S**ocial media is also instrumental in both amplification and reduction of drugs and substance abuse with far-reaching implications for individual and collective behaviours. Although extant literature portrayed social media use and the consumption of illicit drugs and substance (mis)use as differentially gendered, overtime both female and male youths in universities acted similarly when subjected to the same risk and protective conditions.

**T**he article also considered the perceived similarities between social media use and substance use. Like drugs, excessive social media use is toxic and addictive. Largely, therefore, the article demonstrated that the driving and constraining forces; the processes and patterns, and effects of engagement in social media and problematic substance use are relatively similar. Overall, university students who participated in the study, perceived social media, and substance abuse, among the youths in Zimbabwe as both determinist and agentive, confirming the utility of the concepts derived from the Giddens's structuration and Bourdieu's theory of practice.

**T**he article concludes that the relationship between social media use, drugs and substance use is largely bidirectional: substance (ab)use can trigger increased interest in social media and at the same time excessive social media use can drive up substance abuse.

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