

INFLUENCE OF DRUG ADVERTISEMENTS IN THE MEDIA ON DRUG ABUSE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NAKURU COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of media-based drug advertisements on drug abuse among secondary school students in Nakuru County, Kenya. The study was motivated by increasing concerns regarding adolescent exposure to alcohol, cigarette, and substance-related content through television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and digital media platforms. An ex-post facto research design was adopted. The target population comprised Form Two and Form Three students, deputy head teachers, and heads of guidance and counselling departments from selected secondary schools within Nakuru County. Nine schools were sampled through simple random sampling, while purposive sampling was used to select deputy head teachers and guidance and counselling heads. A total of 335 respondents participated in the study. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that students were highly exposed to media content promoting alcohol and cigarette consumption, with television and radio advertisements exerting considerable influence on students' attitudes and behaviours toward drug use. The study further established that school-based guidance and counselling programmes were insufficiently structured to effectively counter the influence of persuasive media advertisements. The study concludes that unrestricted exposure to drug-related advertisements contributes significantly to adolescent drug abuse. The study recommends stricter government regulation of alcohol and cigarette advertisements, strengthening school counselling programmes, enhancing parental supervision, and promoting media literacy education among learners.

Keywords: drug abuse, advertisements, media

Introduction

Drug and substance abuse among adolescents remains a major educational, social, and public health concern globally and within Kenya (NACADA, 2022; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Secondary school students are increasingly exposed to media messages that glamorize alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking, and other forms of substance abuse. Advances in communication technology, increased internet access, and the proliferation of television, radio, and digital media platforms have intensified students' interaction with persuasive media advertisements (Anderson et al., 2009). In many instances, advertisements associate alcohol and cigarettes with success, social acceptance, pleasure, independence, and modern lifestyles, thereby shaping positive attitudes toward substance use among adolescents (O'Keefe, 1978).

In Kenya, the rise in school unrest, violence, indiscipline, poor academic performance, and other risky behaviours among students has frequently been linked to drug and substance abuse (Muganda, 2003; NACADA & KESSHA, 2004). Reports by the National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse continue to indicate increasing rates of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, and miraa use among adolescents (NACADA, 2022). Adolescents are

particularly vulnerable because they are at a developmental stage characterized by identity formation, experimentation, peer influence, and emotional instability (Bandura, 1977).

Media advertisements often employ emotionally appealing strategies such as celebrity endorsements, humour, attractive imagery, and repeated exposure to normalize drug use (Keyishian, 2000). Such advertisements may influence students' perceptions by minimizing the risks associated with substance abuse while emphasizing social rewards (Anderson et al., 2009). Although several studies have examined the prevalence, causes, and consequences of drug abuse among Kenyan adolescents, limited empirical research has specifically investigated the extent to which media drug advertisements influence drug abuse among secondary school students. Moreover, existing studies have largely focused on national or regional trends, with little attention given to the unique socio-cultural and media environment of Nakuru Municipality. Consequently, there is insufficient evidence on how exposure to drug-related advertisements shapes students' attitudes, perceptions, and substance-use behaviours within this locality. This knowledge gap limits the development of targeted interventions and policies aimed at reducing the influence of media-promoted substance use among adolescents. Therefore, this study sought to examine the influence of media drug advertisements on drug abuse among students in secondary schools within Nakuru Municipality, Kenya.

Objective of the Study

To establish how drug advertisements in the media influence drug abuse among students in secondary schools.

Research Question

How do drug advertisements in the media influence drug abuse among students in secondary schools?

Literature Review

Research across the world has consistently demonstrated that media exposure significantly influences adolescent attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours related to substance use. Social Learning Theory, advanced by Albert Bandura (1977), posits that individuals learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and reinforcement from models within their environment. In contemporary society, media personalities, influencers, celebrities, and peers featured in advertisements and social media platforms serve as powerful models for adolescents. Repeated exposure to media messages portraying alcohol and tobacco consumption as fashionable, socially acceptable, and rewarding may contribute to favourable attitudes toward substance use and increase the likelihood of experimentation.

Empirical evidence continues to support this theoretical perspective. A systematic review by Noel, Babor, and Robaina (2017) found that exposure to alcohol marketing across traditional and digital media channels was associated with earlier initiation of alcohol use and increased consumption among adolescents. More recently, studies have shown that social media platforms have become major channels through which alcohol and tobacco industries target young audiences using influencer marketing, branded content, interactive campaigns, and user-generated content (Jernigan & Trangenstein, 2022; WHO, 2023). Unlike traditional advertising, digital marketing allows for personalized and continuous exposure, increasing adolescents' susceptibility to persuasive substance-related messages.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory further explains adolescents' engagement with media by suggesting that individuals actively select media content to satisfy social, emotional, and psychological needs such as entertainment, belongingness, identity formation, and social interaction. As adolescents increasingly spend time on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter), they may encounter substance-related content that reinforces positive perceptions of alcohol and tobacco use. Recent studies indicate that adolescents who frequently engage with substance-related social media content are more likely to report favourable attitudes toward substance use and higher intentions to consume alcohol or tobacco products (Bozzola et al., 2022; Moreno et al., 2023).

The influence of advertising on adolescent substance use is further explained through the normalization effect, whereby repeated exposure to alcohol and tobacco marketing creates perceptions that such behaviours are common, acceptable, and desirable. A review by the World Health Organization (2023) noted that digital alcohol marketing often blurs the distinction between advertising and entertainment, making it difficult for young people to recognize persuasive intent. Similarly, exposure to e-cigarette and tobacco-related advertising on social media has been associated with increased curiosity, experimentation, and use among adolescents (Vassey et al., 2022).

Within the Kenyan context, NACADA (2022) reported that adolescents are increasingly exposed to alcohol and tobacco advertisements through television, social media, music videos, sports sponsorships, and online platforms. While earlier studies in Kenya identified peer pressure, family background, stress, poor parental supervision, and accessibility of drugs as major contributors to adolescent substance abuse (Muganda, 2003), recent developments suggest that digital media has become an additional and increasingly influential risk factor. The widespread use of smartphones and internet-enabled devices has expanded adolescents' exposure to substance-related content beyond traditional media channels.

Although guidance and counselling programmes have been introduced in schools to address behavioural and substance abuse challenges, their effectiveness is often constrained by inadequate resources, insufficiently trained counsellors, and limited parental involvement (Madara, 2004). Consequently, many adolescents continue to rely heavily on media and peer networks as sources of information, social learning, and identity formation. Despite growing international evidence linking digital advertising to adolescent substance use, there remains limited empirical research examining how exposure to media-based drug advertisements influences drug abuse among secondary school students in Kenya, particularly within Nakuru Municipality. This gap underscores the need for localized studies to inform evidence-based interventions and policies aimed at protecting adolescents from the harmful effects of substance-related media marketing.

Methodology

This study adopted an ex-post factor design. The target population was form two and form three students, deputy head teachers and heads of guidance & counseling department in Nakuru County secondary school. In total nine secondary schools were selected through simple random sampling. Purposive technique was used to select the eight deputy head teachers and seven heads of guidance and counseling departments. The total number of respondents were 335. Questionnaires were administered to students and heads of guidance and counselling department. Data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences for Windows.

Findings

The findings established that most secondary schools had access to various forms of media, including television, newspapers, radio, magazines, and internet services. Television emerged as the most accessible medium among students. The study further revealed that students spent a considerable amount of their leisure time watching television programmes, movies, and listening to music through radio and digital platforms. These findings support previous observations that adolescents frequently consume media content as part of their leisure and socialization activities (Keyishian, 2000).

A majority of respondents reported that alcohol and cigarette advertisements were associated with students' perceptions and attitudes toward drug use. Alcohol advertisements were frequently identified by respondents as appealing because they were perceived to portray entertainment, prestige, social success, and youthful lifestyles. Respondents also indicated that repeated exposure to such advertisements was associated with more favourable perceptions of substance use and greater acceptance of drug-related behaviours among students. These findings are consistent with those reported by Anderson et al. (2009), who found a positive association between exposure to alcohol advertising and alcohol use among adolescents. However, given the descriptive nature of the present study, the findings should be interpreted as indicating associations and perceptions rather than direct causal relationships.

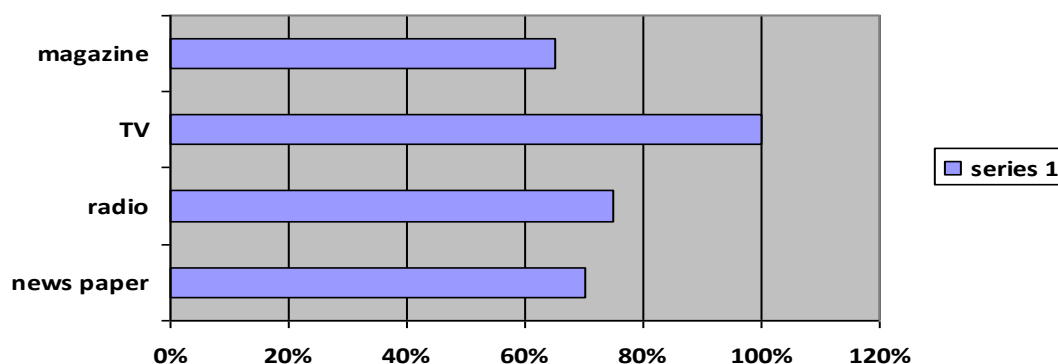


Figure 1. Student's exposure to media

The findings also demonstrated that advertisements employing celebrities, musicians, athletes, and attractive imagery increased students' curiosity and desire to experiment with drugs. The repeated airing of advertisements during prime-time television programmes further increased students' exposure to substance-related messages. These findings are consistent with O'Keefe's (1978) argument that emotional advertising techniques strongly influence consumer behaviour, especially among young audiences.

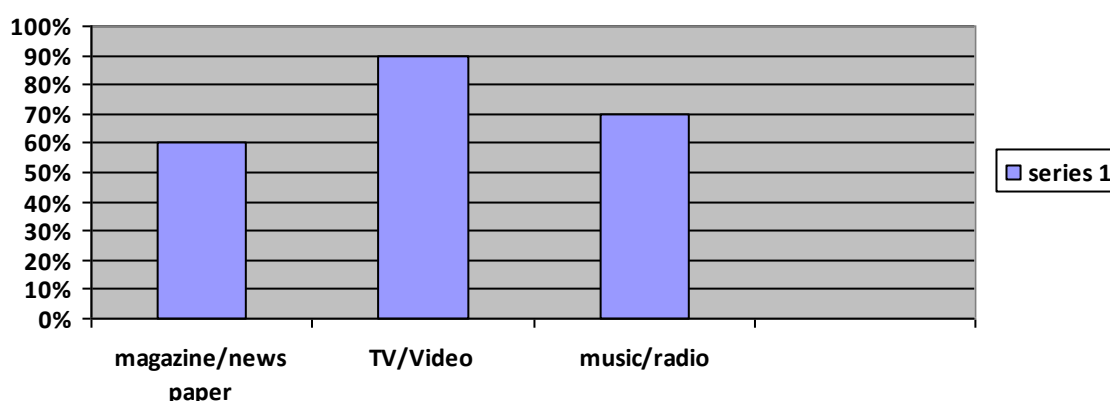


Figure 2. Students' leisure activities.

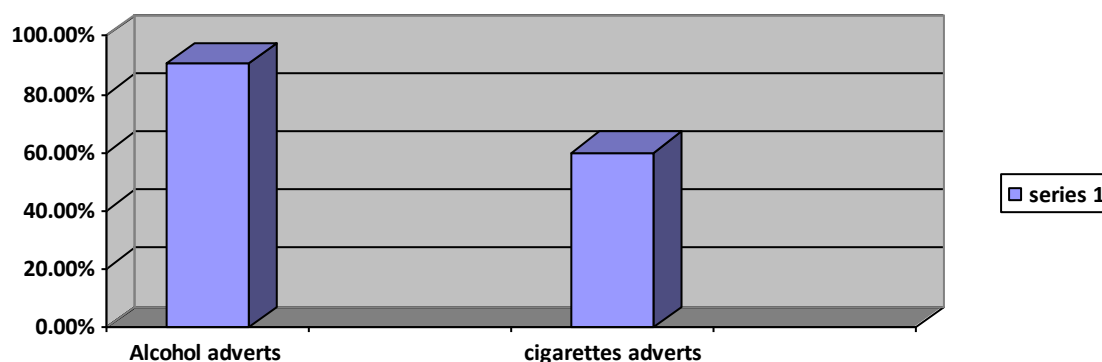


Figure 3. Advertisement and drug type.

Additionally, the study established that guidance and counselling programmes in schools had limited impact in mitigating the influence of media advertisements. Many schools lacked comprehensive preventive programmes, structured media literacy education, and adequate counselling personnel. Similar concerns were raised by Madara (2004), who observed that ineffective counselling programmes reduce schools' ability to address behavioural challenges such as drug abuse. These findings therefore underscore the urgent need for schools, parents, policymakers, and media regulators to collaboratively address the influence of media advertisements on adolescent drug abuse.

Conclusion

The study concludes that media advertisements influence drug abuse among secondary school students in Nakuru Municipality. Students are highly exposed to alcohol and cigarette advertisements through television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and digital media platforms. Such advertisements often glamorize substance use and create positive perceptions toward alcohol and cigarette consumption among adolescents. The study further concludes that adolescents are particularly susceptible to media influence due to peer pressure, curiosity, identity formation, and emotional vulnerability. Although schools have established guidance and counselling programmes, these interventions remain insufficient in effectively countering the persuasive influence of drug advertisements. The findings highlight the need for a multi-sectoral approach involving schools, parents, government agencies, media houses, and community stakeholders in combating adolescent drug abuse.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that the government, through relevant regulatory agencies, strengthen and enforce policies that restrict alcohol and cigarette advertisements targeting adolescents and other vulnerable groups. Regulatory bodies should also require media organizations to include prominent health warnings and educational messages highlighting the risks associated with substance abuse. Given the influence of media advertisements on students' attitudes and behaviours, schools should strengthen their guidance and counselling departments by employing adequately trained counsellors and integrating media literacy education into the curriculum. This would enable students to critically evaluate media content and resist persuasive messages that promote substance use. Parents and guardians should actively monitor their children's media consumption and provide appropriate guidance on responsible and safe media use. Open communication between parents and adolescents regarding the risks associated with drug and substance abuse should also be encouraged. Furthermore, schools should organize regular awareness campaigns, seminars, and peer counselling programmes to educate students about the harmful effects of drug and substance abuse. Such programmes would enhance students' knowledge, promote informed decision-making, and strengthen their ability to resist negative peer and media influences.

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