

Unravelling The Nexus: Social Environment and Peer Influence in Drug Abuse in Lawas, Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

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The rising issue of drug abuse in Sarawak, demands urgent attention as the problem shows no signs of abating. The primary goal of this research is to investigate the most influential factor that contributes to the rise in drug abuse in Lawas and how it affects the selected individual social awareness. By delving into this dynamic, the study aims to enhance the comprehension of the issue and, consequently, develop more effective strategies to mitigate its consequences. The research employed qualitative methodology, with in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. Six participants participated in the in-depth interviews and each referred to using pseudonyms. Participants 1 and 2 are presently enrolled in rehabilitation programs facilitated by the National Anti-Drug Agency (NADA/AADK) division in Limbang. Participants 3, 4, and 5 were selected from the families, relatives, and friends of former addicts. Participant 6 plays a pivotal role as an officer responsible for drug enforcement in Lawas. The study employed social learning theory to gain a comprehensive perspective on the subject matter. The data analysis revealed that the social environment functions as the macro factor, while susceptibility to peer influence serves as the micro factor in drug abuse cases in Lawas and there is a relationship between the factor and the selected individual social awareness. The findings from this research hold immense relevance for a wide spectrum of stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on community and societal development, in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by drug abuse issues in Lawas, Sarawak.

Contribution/Originality: This research offers original insights into drug abuse in Lawas, Sarawak, by applying Social Learning Theory to a rural Malaysian context. It uniquely highlights the impact of peer influence and social environment, filling a gap in localized studies and suggesting culturally sensitive intervention strategies.

1. Introduction

Drug abuse is a pressing issue in Malaysia and in recent years, Sarawak has witnessed a surge in drug abuse cases, coinciding with an increase in high-risk red zones across its districts. The severity of the situation is highlighted in a report by the National Anti-Drug Agency Malaysia (NADA) titled *Buku Maklumat Dadah 2020* (National Anti-Drug Agency Malaysia [NADA], 2021) providing statistical insights into the prevalence of drug abuse in Sarawak. These statistics underscore the urgent need for a robust and effective response to address the escalating challenges associated with drug-related issues in the state.

To understand the rising trend of drug abuse in Sarawak, it is essential to examine the present factors contributing to this increase. For example, different factors can be discovered in different social settings, such as in studies by Hafeiz (1995), where the studies found, that drug abuse is more common among the unemployed and those with intermediate education. Meanwhile, Mohamed et al. (2008), identified a higher tendency for substance and drug misuse among males in Malaysia, with peer influence and curiosity being significant factors. Qureshi (2000), also found a high prevalence of drug abuse among the unmarried, unemployed, and those with low education. These studies suggest that socio-demographic factors, peer influence, and different drug abuse factors are key considerations in understanding and addressing drug abuse.

By examining the various factors contributing to drug abuse in Sarawak, this study aims to provide fresh insights and perspectives on the sociological aspects of the issue. The primary objective is to identify the most influential factors driving the increase in drug abuse in Lawas and to understand how these factors impact the social awareness of affected individuals. The findings of this research could lead to a reevaluation of current prevention strategies, offering a foundation for improved rehabilitation and treatment programs in Sarawak. Ultimately, this study highlights the urgency and complexity of drug abuse issues in the region, advocating for comprehensive policy development, greater community involvement, and the exploration of alternative rehabilitation methods.

2. Literature Review

Drug abuse is characterized by the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including both legal drugs such as alcohol and prescription medications, and illegal drugs like heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine (Fox, 2002). It is classified as a substance-related disorder and can lead to significant physical, social, and psychological harm. The definitions and interpretations of drug abuse vary across public health, medical, and criminal justice contexts. The misuse of these substances can result in criminal or antisocial behavior, and prolonged use may cause lasting personality changes. Additionally, drug abuse can lead to legal consequences, which vary widely depending on local laws. Hadfield et al. (2001) describe drug abuse as the harmful use of substances that can lead to physical, psychological, legal, or social harm, including both licit and illicit drugs, and is often characterized by a pattern of ingestion that results in injury. Mandal (2021) presents drug abuse as the repeated ingestion of illegal substances, which causes a variety of physical, psychological, and social difficulties, whether intentional or unintentional.

A report by the National Anti-Drug Agency Malaysia (NADA) found that the five most-used drugs among Malaysian addicts are opiates, methamphetamines (crystalline/tablets), marijuana, amphetamine, and psychotropic drugs (Yong, 2022). Methamphetamine (crystalline) has the highest number of users, with a steady increase from 2016 to 2020. Spencer and Navaratnam (1980), found that 11% of Malaysian secondary school students had experience with drug use, with cannabis being the most commonly reported drug among older students and sedatives among younger students. The study also highlighted the progression from multiple drug use to heroin.

Several factors are often associated with drug abuse, Mohamed et al. (2008) identify that male respondents were more likely to misuse substances and that there was a significant relationship between substance misuse and various demographic and environmental factors. Meanwhile, Lian and Chu (2013) highlighted peer influence and curiosity as significant contributors to drug abuse relapse. Rusdi et al. (2008), noted a shift in drug abuse patterns from opium to other substances, with an increasing involvement of Malays. Most of these factors were largely influenced by the social environment.

The development and persistence of drug use disorders are significantly influenced by the social environment (Smith, 2021). It encompasses the larger social, cultural, and economic context in which individuals and organizations operate. These influences could include demographic transformations, cultural shifts, economic situations, governmental structures, and other elements that greatly impact society. Similarly, studies by Bardo et al. (2013), found that social stress, isolation, enrichment, and dominance significantly influence drug self-administration across a range of drugs and reinforcement schedules. This correlation between findings in animal studies and human experiences underscores the applicability of these models in forecasting patterns of human drug abuse and assessing possible strategies for managing drug abuse disorders.

The social context plays a crucial effect in the prevalence of drug usage in Malaysia. Rahman (2009), discovered that a lack of social support upon re-entry into the community was a factor in drug user recurrence. Family background is another significant factor. Rahman et al. (2015), found that unstable familial ties and settings correlate with earlier drug-use initiation. Landier et al. (2013) examined the effects of substance use disorders on families and children, revealing that the family serves as the primary source of attachment, nurturing, and socialization. The study highlights the critical impact of substance use disorders on both the family and individual members, noting that such disorders disrupt family dynamics, resulting in unmet developmental needs, emotional distress, and a heightened risk of early drug abuse among children.

One of the most significant predictors of drug use among adolescents and young adults is the substance use behaviour exhibited by their peers (Bahr et al., 2005). Numerous epidemiological studies have explored the relationship between social factors and drug self-administration, consistently highlighting the influence of peers (Bot et al., 2005; Kelly et al., 2013; Salvy et al., 2014). These studies suggest that peer influence operates on both distal (e.g., adopting group norms) and proximal (e.g., spending time with individuals who use drugs) levels. Recent research by (Salvy et al., 2014) indicates that distal factors become less prominent over time, while proximal factors gain increased influence. Consequently, peers play a crucial role in initiating and perpetuating drug use, with proximal influences gaining progressively more significance as time unfolds.

Peer influence can be both positive, such as encouraging abstinence, or negative, promoting drug use (Borsari & Carey, 2001). Toriman (2018) identified peer influence as a major factor influencing drug addiction. Lian and Chu (2013) also highlighted peer influence and curiosity as significant factors contributing to drug abuse. Fergusson et al. (2006), identified a significant link between peer groups and drug abuse. Additionally, Ajayi and Ekundayo (2010), recognized the impact of peer groups on students' decisions regarding drug use.

2.1. Social Learning Theories

Social learning theories describe how crime evolves from learning and social interaction, particularly through imitation (Rowan, 2023). According to social learning theory, deviance and enforced behavior are learned behaviors, involving traditional learning methods such as imitation, trial-and-error, improvisation, rewarding behavior, and cognitive processes within the community (Akers & Jennings, 2009). The frequency and intensity of engagement are key features of the theory. The amount of time a person is exposed to certain definitions and the timing of interactions are important in understanding criminal activity. While peer groups and family units are critical contexts for learning behavior, other institutions like schools, neighbors, and media also contribute to the learning of specific criminal behaviors (Cameranesi & Piotrowski, 2020).

Research on social learning theory and drug abuse reveals how socialization processes can lead to criminalization Strickland and Smith (2015), found that social factors, such as the influence of a social partner and the attitudes of peers and parents, play a significant role in drug self-administration and nonmedical prescription drug use among adolescents. Smith (2021) emphasizes targeting the functional relationships between an individual's characteristics, social environment, and drug-centric behaviours in addiction treatment. Social learning theories suggest that the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of a social group are passed on to individual members, with social interactions shaping future behaviour (Akers, 2003).

Peers might selectively encourage certain behaviours (e.g., drug use) and discourage others (e.g., drug abstinence) among group members. Social learning theories propose that adjusting the social environment can prevent and address drug use and abuse (Smith, 2021). Watkins (2016) supports social learning theory in explaining prescription drug misuse, particularly through concepts like differential association and differential reinforcement. Payne and Salotti (2007) found links between social control and social learning theories and drug use on college campuses. Lee (2004), supported the Social Structure and Social Learning (SSSL) model, showing that social learning variables mediate the effects of social structural factors on adolescent substance use. Akers (2003), highlights the importance of social learning theory in explaining crime and delinquency, emphasizing its relevance to macro-level issues. Finally, Brauer (2009), used multilevel analysis to demonstrate how reinforcement and learned definitions mediate the relationship between social learning variables and self-reported theft and marijuana use. These studies collectively highlight the significant impact of social factors on drug abuse, affirming the relevance of social learning theory in understanding the connection between drug abuse, criminal behavior, and various social factors.

3. Research Methods

In this study, data collection was conducted through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews in the *Kedayan* dialect to investigate the causes of drug abuse in Lawas. The interviews involved an officer responsible for drug enforcement, two ex-drug addicts undergoing rehabilitation, and three individuals connected to ex-addicts. The semi-structured format included both predetermined and spontaneous questions to ensure flexibility and depth, with predetermined questions primarily used at the start of each session. The informal nature of the interviews facilitated open and detailed sharing of information. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy. After recording, the audio data was transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then systematically reviewed and analyzed to identify key themes and insights. The interviews comprised two main parts: the first focused on the participants' backgrounds, while the second addressed specific questions designed to answer the research question. The researcher prepared three different sets of predetermined questions in both Malay and English, despite the *Kedayan* dialect being predominantly used during the interviews. Each set of questions was tailored to the participant's role in the drug abuse issue in Lawas.

4. Results

The data analysis revealed that the social environment functions as the macro factor, while susceptibility to peer influence serves as the micro factor directly contributing to the rise in drug abuse cases in Lawas. The study also discovered there a relationship between these factors and the selected individual social awareness. As per the participant's perspective, the social environment within Lawas is identified as the primary macro factor contributing to drug abuse. By addressing the broader social determinants of drug abuse in Lawas, society can create a more supportive and resilient environment that reduces the prevalence of drug abuse and promotes healthier communities.

Participant 6, an officer working with one of the law enforcement teams in Lawas, shares a similar viewpoint with the participant that drug abuse in Lawas has the social environment as the macro factor and is prone to peer influences as the micro factor for Lawas drug problem.

"Drug addiction in Lawas is largely generated by the environment; there are many people who sell, making it difficult to manage. These individuals have not been exposed to enough knowledge to avoid the influence of those around them."

(Participant 6, 49)

Participant 4, admitted that her brother attempted to stop using drugs in the previous years but has failed quite a few times due to the social environment. Mostly due to everyone in his brother's social circle still actively involved in the same activities.

"He has (trying to stop), but failed due to friends and surroundings"

(Participant 4, 42)

The social environment is a key factor in determining the likelihood of drug use or the development of drug use disorders, with recent preclinical studies highlighting the

profound impact of proximal social factors—those immediately present during drug exposure—on both drug-seeking and drug-taking behaviors. Communities characterized by high drug availability and acceptance create an environment where drug use is normalized, thereby fostering experimentation and continued use. This normalization can lead to a sense of belonging and acceptance among individuals who engage in drug-related activities, further reinforcing their behavior. Consequently, the social environment, acting as a macro-level factor, significantly contributes to the escalation of drug abuse, underscoring the need for targeted interventions that address these broader social influences (Strickland & Smith, 2014).

“Drug addiction in Lawas is largely generated by the environment; there are many people who sell, making it difficult to manage. These individuals have not been exposed to enough knowledge to avoid the influence of those around them.”

(Participant 6,49)

Participant 4, 42 admits that her brother attempted to stop using the drug in the previous years but has failed quite a few times due to the social environment.

“He has (trying to stop), but failed due to friends and surroundings”

(Participant 4,42)

The social environment is crucial in increasing the likelihood of drug abuse. Normalization of drug use within these environments can lead to a sense of belonging and acceptance among individuals who partake in such activities (Tomás et al., 2016). All 6 participants agree that social awareness toward drug abuse in Lawas has played a significant role in the case increment over the past years. Through the analysis, it was found that their social awareness is influenced by their social environment and also varies according to their social environment. Based on data analysis, three main factors altered the participant's social awareness, which are prone to peer influence, family history, and the lack of an authoritative role.

4.1. Micro Factor: Prone to Peer Influence

Based on the analysis, being prone to peer influence is the current micro factor in Lawas. According to the first participant (Participant 3), being prone to peer influences is the most influential factor in Lawas. She stated that when an addict sees a friend attempting and actively doing drugs, it can easily trigger their social circle to do the same.

“Friends' influence, often motivated by witnessing others do it, leads them to try, and sometimes friends invite them to try”

(Participant,42)

Participant 4 revealed that her brother had made multiple attempts to quit drug use but struggled to do so due to his peer group. He began using drugs during his high school years and has continued to engage in this behavior since. According to Hawa, her brother has been using drugs in the company of his friends, some of whom remain active drug users despite multiple stints in rehab.

“He has (trying to stop), but failed due to friends, he's been taking it since school; after all, most of his friends who influence him are school friends”

(Participant 4, 42)

Similarly, to the other participants, Participant 5, asserted that those involved in drug abuse in Lawas have been significantly influenced by their peers. She openly acknowledged that her brother, who has been struggling with drug abuse for an extended period, initially became involved with drugs through his friends who were also using them.

"According to what I know about my brother, he is influenced by drug-using friends."

(Participant 5,42)

Peers play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' behaviours and decisions. Adolescents and young adults in Lawas, Sarawak, are often particularly susceptible to peer influence. Communities with high levels of drug availability and acceptance may encourage experimentation and continued use. The normalization of drug use within these environments can lead to a sense of belonging and acceptance among individuals who partake in such activities.

Both Participant 1 and Participant 2 state that their involvement with drug misuse was influenced by a friend. Participant 1 claims that his friends suggested he use drugs for stress reduction and that he continued to do so with these friends after he became involved. Participant 1 participates in the activities and admits to learning all the procedures and processes with his friends.

"I believe I began using it in 2018, 2019, and I primarily use it for work purposes... I had heard from others that if you use it, it can help you work for a long period."

(Participant 1,42)

Meanwhile, Participant 2 admits to using drugs out of curiosity and continues to participate in the activity with his friends; even after he leaves the recovery clinic, several of his friends who are still actively involved in the activity want him to join them, which he has been trying to avoid

"At first, some friends asked me to join them, but honestly, it was more like I had been wanting to try it, which is common for adolescents, so I simply wanted to try it, and when I took it, I felt brave since we were the only ones who dared to take it, and it felt amazing, so I want to try it again. When I use that thing, it feels as though we are not ourselves; it is enjoyable."

(Participant 2,42)

Participant 2, participant 3, and Participant 4 all claim that their acquaintances who are involved with drug abuse are the result of direct and indirect encounters and affiliations with delinquent people. Even after leaving the rehab center, both participants 1 and 2 are still struggling to avoid their friends and family who are still involved with this activity.

In this study, it is found that peer groups have profoundly shaped an individual vulnerability to drug abuse. As the social environment normalizes or tolerates drug

abuse, individuals become more susceptible to peer pressure, increasing the likelihood of engagement in such behaviours. For example, if an individual is surrounded by drug-using peers, and the community exhibits a permissive stance towards substance abuse, the risk of peer influence leading to drug abuse is heightened. Their social awareness is influenced directly by their peer groups, as mentioned by participant 1, admits that his decision to take drugs was largely influenced by his friend's suggestion, while Participant 2 admit that he takes drugs together with his friend and both of them admit to learning the whole process along with their peer.

4.2. Social Learning Theory

The findings clearly indicate that social environment factors in Lawas have a notable influence on the social awareness of the selected participants. Social learning theory helps to elucidate the process of imitation that occurs after individuals observe others engaging in similar activities (Rowan, 2023). This theory explains that through interactions, individuals acquire values, attitudes, techniques, and motivations related to criminal behavior. Social learning theory suggests that the social environment has a substantial impact on shaping individuals' perspectives and social awareness regarding specific issues. It also posits that, depending on the social environment, it can influence an individual's decision to engage in criminal activities. The theory comprises two key aspects: the behavioral-interactional and normative dimensions (Cameranesi & Piotrowski, 2020).

The micro factor being prone to peer influence proves there is a process of learning and imitation after observing others participating in similar activities (Rowan, 2023). This theory explains that through interactions, individuals learn values, attitudes, techniques, and motivations for criminal behavior. Both Participant 1 and Participant 2 mentioned that their involvement in drug misuse was influenced by a friend. These participants shared the same beliefs with their peers and admitted to learning all the procedures and processes from their friends. Even after both participants left the recovery clinic, several of their friends who remained in the same circle admitted to still being actively involved in the activity.

An important aspect of social learning theory is the emphasis on the frequency and intensity of interactions. As shared by Participant 6, most of his clients who began drug use at an early age typically had early exposure to drug abuse. Drawing from a decade of experience in dealing with drug abuse issues in Lawas, he cited an example of a 12-year-old client who admitted to using drugs due to early exposure. The duration of exposure to a particular environment and the timing of interactions are critical in explaining criminal activity, which elucidates how having a similar circle or history in drug abuse leads to early involvement. Social learning theory highlights that the most important contexts for learning behavior include peer groups and family units, although various entities such as schools, neighbors, and media also play roles (Cameranesi & Piotrowski, 2020).

Social awareness emerges as a key player in the intricate process of social learning. Individuals with high social awareness are finely attuned to the behaviors and interactions of those in their social sphere. Their heightened sensitivity to social cues empowers them to observe and interpret not only the actions and attitudes but also the outcomes experienced by others. An essential facet of social learning theory relates to the frequency and intensity of interactions. The theory emphasizes the significance of

various contexts, with peer groups and family units playing pivotal roles in the acquisition and reinforcement of behavior. Nevertheless, additional entities such as schools, neighbors, and media serve as alternative settings where learning, whether criminal or prosocial, may occur (Cameranesi & Piotrowski, 2020).

Participant 1 and Participant 2 each relay their experiences of being influenced by friends in their involvement with drug misuse. Participant 1 states that his friends initially suggested using drugs as a means of stress reduction, and he continued engaging in these activities with his friends. This shared belief system led Participant 1 to participate in these activities and adopt the procedures and processes associated with drug misuse. Similarly, Participant 2 admits to initially experimenting out of curiosity and subsequently continuing to partake in these activities with friends, even after leaving a recovery clinic. The ongoing influence of friends who remain actively involved perpetuates this behavior.

This theme is echoed by Participants 4, 5, and 6, all of whom attribute their acquaintances' involvement in drug abuse to direct and indirect interactions with delinquent individuals. Some recount how their acquaintances were friends with drug addicts, while others mention that at least one family member's involvement exposed them to the entire process. These experiences underscore the theory's central premise that behavior, whether positive or negative, is learned and reinforced through interactions within social networks.

In essence, the use of social learning theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how behavior is acquired and maintained through interactions, with social awareness playing a pivotal role in shaping these dynamics. The shared experiences of participants vividly illustrate the theory's principles in action, highlighting the power of social learning in influencing both prosocial and criminal behaviors.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the data analysis has shed light on the intricate dynamics of drug abuse in Lawas, Sarawak. The findings underscore the pivotal role played by the social environment, acting as the macro factor, in influencing the prevalence of drug abuse within the community. Additionally, susceptibility to peer influence emerged as a significant micro factor that directly contributes to the escalating drug abuse cases. The study also discovered there is a relationship between this factor with the selected individual social awareness. The interplay between the broader social context and individual susceptibility illuminates the complexity of the issue. To effectively combat drug abuse in Lawas, it is imperative to address both the social and peer-driven factors, employing multifaceted strategies that encompass prevention, education, and support systems. A holistic approach that considers the interconnection between the macro and micro factors is essential in tackling the rising challenges of drug abuse within this region.

However, due to the current limitations of this research, future studies should consider increasing the number of participants for individual in-depth interviews. Additionally, future research could explore the application of quantitative methods to assess the level of social awareness in Lawas. Expanding the age range of participants should also be a

consideration, as the majority of those involved in this study are in their 40s. This broader age range would allow for a variety of generational perspectives.

In essence, the social environment takes on a significant role in influencing an individual's vulnerability to drug abuse, serving as a broader backdrop that either fosters or discourages such behavior within a specific community. Concurrently, peer influence, operating at the micro-level, exerts a more immediate impact on individual decisions and actions. It's the powerful force of peer pressure that can lead individuals down the path of drug abuse, primarily fueled by the desire for acceptance or the normalization of substance use within their social circles. Recognizing and comprehending this dynamic is pivotal in crafting effective strategies for prevention and intervention. By addressing both macro and micro influences, we can better equip ourselves to reduce the prevalence of drug abuse and mitigate the far-reaching consequences it has on individuals and communities. In these efforts, we strive to create healthier, more resilient societies that prioritize the well-being and prospects of all their members.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers adhered to the ethical standards established by the Research Ethics Committee of the University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) for Human Research Ethics (Non-Medical). All procedures involving human participants in this study were carried out in full compliance with current human ethics guidelines, specifically following the Malaysian Code of Responsible Conduct in Research, *Buku Dasar Penyelidikan Inovasi dan Enterprise UNIMAS*, as well as any additional conditions set forth by UNIMAS's Human Research Ethics Committee or its Sub-Committees. Prior to fieldwork, participant information sheets were distributed, and the consent forms were thoroughly explained to ensure that the community involved fully understood and agreed to the data collection process.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have stated that they have no conflicts of interest concerning this study. They confirm that there are no potential conflicts related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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