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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-AWARENESS AND SUBSTANCE USE BEHAVIOUR AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN UASIN GISHU COUNTY, KENYA

Chepgimis Margaret Makale[1*], Esther Chepsiror[2]

[1]PhD Student, Psychology Department, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa.

[2]Lecturer, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Catholic University of Eastern Africa.

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***Corresponding Author: Chepgimis Margaret Makale**

PhD Student, Psychology Department, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa.

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ABSTRACT

The use of substances among adolescence in Kenya is on the rise, creating a concern both at educational and health public level. The present study explored the relationship between self-awareness, an important aspect of emotional intelligence and substances use among secondary school students in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. Guided by the Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory, a convergent parallel mixed, methods design was adopted. Quantitative data was obtained from 377 Form Three students through a closed ended questionnaire while qualitative data was obtained through focus group discussions (FGD) and interview schedules with teachers and guidance and counselling officers. Quantitative analyses involved the use of descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficient and multiple regressions. Results indicated that self-awareness was strongly related with substance use behaviour; r=.436, p<.001 and self-awareness significantly predicted .444; p<.001. Qualitative results substantiated the findings and showed that students with better self-awareness identified emotional triggers, reflected on effects and avoided peer pressure. The study concluded that self-awareness is a significant factor in prevention of adolescent substances use. Recommendations were made for the integration of emotional literacy levels among adolescents in secondary school guidance and counselling programs.

KEYWORDS: self-awareness; emotional intelligence; substance use behaviour; adolescents; Kenya

1. INTRODUCTION

Substance use among secondary school students has increasingly emerged as a critical educational, psychosocial, and public health challenge, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Defined as maladaptive patterns of psychoactive substance consumption, it interferes with physical health, psychological functioning, academic engagement, and social adjustment (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). Adolescence, particularly the secondary school period, is a developmental stage of heightened vulnerability to such behaviours due to ongoing neurobiological maturation, increased emotional reactivity, identity formation processes, and heightened sensitivity to peer influence (Steinberg, 2017). Early initiation into substance use during this period is consistently associated with a range of adverse outcomes, including impaired academic performance, behavioural difficulties, mental health disorders, and an elevated risk of substance dependence in adulthood (NACADA, 2021).

Globally, student substance use remains a persistent concern despite decades of prevention and control efforts. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 13.6% of secondary school students aged 15–19 years engage in heavy episodic drinking, with cannabis being the most widely used illicit substance among young people worldwide (WHO, 2018). Recent global evidence indicates that student substance use is increasingly driven not merely by experimentation, but by emotional distress, academic pressure, social exclusion, and ineffective coping strategies (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). Consequently, contemporary prevention research has shifted attention from solely external control measures toward internal psychological protective factors that enable secondary school students to navigate emotional and social challenges without resorting to substance use.

Within sub-Saharan Africa, student substance use has intensified amidst rapid urbanization, socio-economic inequality, youth unemployment, and the erosion of traditional social support systems. Empirical studies across the region indicate that a substantial proportion of secondary school students report lifetime or current use of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, inhalants, and misused pharmaceutical substances (Olawole-Isaac et al., 2018; Peltzer & Pengpid, 2021). Unlike many high-income contexts, secondary school students in African settings often encounter substance use in environments characterized by limited access to

mental health services, under-resourced school counselling programs, and strong peer-driven norms, thereby increasing vulnerability to sustained and escalated use.

In Kenya, student substance use is a growing national concern with significant implications for educational attainment and youth well-being. National surveys indicate increasing exposure to alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, inhalants, and prescription medications among secondary school students (National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse [NACADA], 2023). Uasin Gishu County, in particular, reports prevalence rates exceeding national averages, with approximately 28.4% of secondary school students indicating lifetime use of at least one psychoactive substance (NACADA, 2022). School records and county reports further associate substance use with absenteeism, declining academic performance, indiscipline, violence, and psychosocial distress (NACADA, 2022; Koech, 2021). Despite the implementation of guidance and counselling programs, school-based sensitization campaigns, and punitive disciplinary measures, substance use persists, suggesting that prevailing approaches may insufficiently address underlying emotional and psychological determinants of adolescent behaviour.

Emerging scholarship increasingly emphasizes emotional intelligence as a critical internal resource for adolescent adjustment and risk reduction. Emotional intelligence broadly refers to a set of abilities related to the perception, understanding, regulation, and utilization of emotions in oneself and others (Mayer et al., 2016). Among its core domains, self-awareness is widely regarded as foundational, underpinning subsequent capacities for emotional regulation, empathy, and adaptive decision-making. Self-awareness is the ability to recognize emotional states as they occur, understand their origins, and reflect on their influence on cognition and behaviour (Goleman, 1995). Adolescents with higher levels of self-awareness may be better equipped to identify emotional distress, anticipate behavioural consequences, and resist maladaptive coping strategies such as substance use.

The present study is theoretically grounded in Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence Theory, which conceptualizes emotional intelligence as a constellation of interrelated competencies influencing behavioural outcomes. Within this framework, self-awareness constitutes the foundational domain upon which self-regulation and social competencies are built. Deficits in self-awareness are theorized to impair emotional regulation, increase impulsivity, and heighten susceptibility to risky behaviours, including substance use. Emotional Intelligence Theory is further complemented by Social Learning Theory, which

posits that behaviour is acquired and reinforced through observation, modeling, and social interaction within salient environments (Bandura, 1977). During adolescence, peer norms and emotional responses to social cues play a central role in shaping behavioural choices. Self-awareness therefore functions as a mediating mechanism that enables secondary school students to reflect on internal emotional reactions and exercise agency rather than uncritically imitating observed substance-related behaviours.

Empirical evidence from high-income contexts consistently demonstrates an inverse relationship between self-awareness and student substance use. Studies show that secondary school students with higher emotional clarity and reflective capacity are less likely to initiate substance use and more likely to disengage from high-risk peer networks (Sánchez-Álvarez et al., 2022). Longitudinal research further indicates that early development of emotional insight predicts lower substance use trajectories in later adolescence, even after controlling for socio-demographic factors and peer influence (Kun et al., 2019). Emerging African evidence aligns with these findings; for example, intervention research in Uganda demonstrated that self-awareness exercises embedded within life-skills curricula significantly reduced inhalant use among secondary school students (Huang, et al., 2017). However, in Kenya, empirical studies have largely examined emotional competencies in relation to general behavioural adjustment or academic outcomes, with substance use rarely treated as a primary outcome variable (Kasera et al., 2019; Nyamoma et al., 2024).

This limited empirical attention to self-awareness as a distinct protective factor against substance use among Kenyan secondary school students constitutes a critical knowledge gap. Moreover, existing studies often rely on purely quantitative designs, offering limited insight into the emotional processes through which self-awareness influences behavioural choices in real-world school contexts. Addressing this gap is particularly important in counties such as Uasin Gishu, where substance use prevalence remains high despite conventional prevention efforts.

Accordingly, the present study examined the relationship between self-awareness and substance use behaviour among secondary school students in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya, using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. By isolating self-awareness as a core emotional intelligence domain and integrating statistical analysis with qualitative accounts of emotional experience, this study seeks to extend Emotional Intelligence Theory within an

African adolescent context and to generate evidence capable of informing emotionally grounded, school-based substance use prevention strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

The study is anchored in Emotional Intelligence Theory, which conceptualizes emotional functioning as a set of competencies shaping perception, regulation, and behaviour in emotionally salient contexts (Mayer et al., 2016). Within this framework, self-awareness is foundational, enabling individuals to recognize emotional states as they arise and to reflect on their behavioural implications (Goleman, 1995). In school settings, deficits in self-awareness may impair emotional regulation and increase reliance on maladaptive coping strategies, including substance use. Social Learning Theory provides a complementary lens by emphasizing the role of peer modeling and reinforcement in shaping behaviour (Bandura, 1977). Within secondary schools, exposure to substance-using peers often coincides with emotional stressors. Self-awareness is therefore conceptualized as a mediating capacity that enables students to interpret emotional cues arising from peer interactions and to exercise agency rather than uncritical imitation.

2.2 Empirical Evidence on Self-Awareness and Substance Use

Evidence from high-income settings consistently demonstrates an inverse association between self-awareness and substance use among secondary school students. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies indicate that students with higher emotional clarity and reflective capacity report lower substance use and reduced susceptibility to peer pressure (Kun et al., 2019; Sánchez-Álvarez et al., 2022). Meta-analytic evidence further shows that school-based social and emotional learning programs that emphasize emotional self-awareness are associated with meaningful reductions in risk behaviours, including substance use (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

Research from African contexts, though more limited, aligns with these findings. Studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa have reported significant associations between emotional competencies and reduced engagement in alcohol and tobacco use among secondary school students (Peltzer & Pengpid, 2021). Intervention research in East Africa has further demonstrated that self-awareness and reflection exercises integrated into school curricula can reduce substance-related risk behaviours (Huang, et al., 2017). In Kenya, existing studies have largely examined emotional competencies in relation to academic engagement and

behavioural adjustment rather than substance use as a primary outcome (Kasera et al., 2019; Nyamoma et al., 2024). Research addressing student substance use has tended to emphasize external factors such as peer influence, family background, and disciplinary approaches, with limited attention to internal emotional mechanisms (Koech, 2021; NACADA, 2022). This gap constrains the development of prevention strategies that address how students emotionally process stress and peer pressure.

2.3 Summary of Knowledge Gap

The reviewed literature indicates that self-awareness is a key protective factor against substance use among secondary school students. However, empirical studies isolating self-awareness as a distinct emotional intelligence domain within Kenyan school contexts remain scarce. Moreover, limited qualitative attention has been given to the emotional processes through which self-awareness shapes substance-related decisions in everyday school life. The present study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between self-awareness and substance use behaviour among secondary school students in Uasin Gishu County using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, grounded in the pragmatism paradigm. This design was considered appropriate as it allows for the simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, followed by integration at the interpretation stage. The approach enabled the study to establish statistical relationships between self-awareness and substance use behaviour while also capturing students' and teachers' perspectives on the emotional processes underlying substance-related decisions within school settings. Convergent designs are particularly suitable for educational and psychosocial research where complex behaviours are shaped by both measurable patterns and lived experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya, a region characterized by socio-economic diversity, rapid urbanization, and documented increases in substance use among secondary school students. The target population comprised Form Three students enrolled in public and private secondary schools, as well as class teachers and guidance and counselling

teachers working within the sampled schools. Form Three students were selected because they had sufficient exposure to secondary school environments and were less affected by national examination pressures than Form Four students, making them appropriate respondents for both survey and qualitative components.

3.3 Sampling Procedures and Sample Size

A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed to ensure representativeness across school categories and sub-counties. In the first stage, secondary schools were stratified by type and location. A 10% sampling ratio yielded twenty-three secondary schools, selected through proportionate stratified random sampling. In the second stage, students were selected proportionately from each sampled school using simple random sampling. The student sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for large populations, resulting in a sample of 377 Form Three students. This sample size was adequate for correlational and regression analyses, providing sufficient statistical power to detect moderate relationships between study variables. From each sampled school, one class teacher and one guidance and counselling teacher were purposively selected based on their direct engagement with student welfare. Focus group discussion participants were identified through snowball sampling to ensure inclusion of students with diverse experiences related to substance use and emotional challenges.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using structured self-administered questionnaires. The self-awareness scale comprised twelve items assessing four interrelated indicators: emotional recognition, awareness of emotional triggers, emotional expression, and self-confidence in emotional regulation. Items were adapted from established emotional intelligence measures and contextualized for the Kenyan secondary school setting. Substance use behaviour was measured using items assessing engagement with commonly used substances, including alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, inhalants, and misused prescription medications.

Prior to the main study, the instruments were piloted in schools with similar characteristics to those included in the final sample. Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding .80 for the self-awareness scale and acceptable reliability for the substance use

behaviour scale, indicating strong internal consistency. Content validity was established through expert review by specialists in counselling psychology and educational research. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with class teachers and guidance and counselling teachers, as well as focus group discussions with students. Interview and discussion guides were designed to elicit perceptions of emotional awareness, coping strategies, peer influence, and substance-related behaviours within school contexts.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted during the school term with approval from relevant educational and ethical authorities. Questionnaires were administered in classroom settings under the supervision of the researcher and trained assistants to ensure clarity and completeness. Qualitative interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in private school spaces to promote openness and confidentiality. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize levels of self-awareness and substance use behaviour. Pearson product–moment correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationship between self-awareness and substance use behaviour. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive contribution of self-awareness to substance use behaviour. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo version 14. Analysis followed an iterative process involving familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, and refinement. Themes were derived inductively and then interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred at the interpretation stage, where convergence, complementarity, and divergence were examined to provide a comprehensive understanding of the results.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee and national research authorities. Permission was also secured from the Ministry of Education and school administrations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with additional parental consent for student participants who were minors. Confidentiality and

anonymity were ensured through the use of codes rather than names, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study examined the relationship between self-awareness and substance use behaviour among secondary school students using an integrated mixed-methods approach. Quantitative and qualitative findings are presented concurrently and interpreted in relation to each other in order to explain not only the magnitude of observed associations but also the emotional and social processes through which self-awareness shapes substance-related decisions in school contexts.

4.1 Descriptive Profile of Self-Awareness

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for twelve items measuring self-awareness. Mean scores ranged from 3.32 to 3.50, indicating moderate to moderately high levels of emotional awareness across the sample.

Table 1: Self-Awareness and Substance Use Behaviour.

Item	Mean	SD
I am aware of my emotions as I experience them	3.34	1.20
I am able to recognize when I am feeling down or upset	3.41	1.21
I am capable of describing my feelings in detail	3.33	1.25
I can distinguish between different emotions I experience	3.45	1.26
I can easily identify what makes me feel anxious or stressed	3.44	1.22
I am aware of the triggers that lead to my stress or discomfort	3.44	1.26
I am able to identify what makes me feel excited or motivated	3.39	1.23
I am aware of how my mood affects my behaviour and interactions	3.34	1.22
I feel confident in expressing how I feel to others	3.43	1.21
I am aware of how my emotions influence my decision-making	3.32	1.22
I often reflect on how my emotions influence my thoughts and actions	3.50	1.20
I notice when my emotions are about to change	3.48	1.28

Source: Field data (2025)

Mean scores ranged from 3.32 to 3.50, indicating moderate to moderately high levels of self-awareness across the sample. Students reported relatively stronger capacity for reflective awareness, such as noticing emotional changes and reflecting on emotional influences on behaviour, than for articulating emotions in detail. These findings suggest that many students possess a basic capacity to identify emotional states, but that this awareness may remain largely cognitive rather than fully operationalised in behaviour. This distinction becomes clearer when quantitative results are examined alongside qualitative accounts.

4.2 Emotional Recognition and Substance Use Behaviour

Items assessing emotional recognition yielded mean scores ranging from 3.32 to 3.45. Awareness of emotions as they were experienced recorded a mean of 3.34 (SD = 1.20), while recognition of emotional lows such as feeling down or upset recorded a mean of 3.41 (SD = 1.21). The highest mean within this indicator was observed for the ability to distinguish between different emotions (M = 3.45, SD = 1.26), suggesting that many students were able to cognitively label emotional states such as stress, excitement, or sadness. Emotional differentiation is theoretically important because it allows individuals to move beyond undifferentiated distress and engage in reflective decision-making rather than impulsive action. The moderate mean scores indicate that emotional recognition was present but not uniformly strong across the student population.

Qualitative findings illustrated how emotional recognition operated within everyday school experiences. Teachers described deliberate efforts to cultivate emotional awareness through routine practices such as emotional check-ins and guided reflection. One teacher noted that such practices helped students notice emotional shifts throughout the day, enabling early identification of stress or frustration. These observations align with Emotional Intelligence Theory, which posits that awareness of emotional states is a prerequisite for regulation.

Students' narratives further clarified the protective role of emotional recognition. Several participants explained that recognising stress or emotional discomfort enabled them to avoid peer situations where substance use was likely. Early recognition allowed some students to disengage before peer pressure intensified. However, other accounts revealed a limitation of recognition alone. Some students acknowledged being aware of emotional distress while still engaging in substance use, indicating that awareness without regulation may be insufficient in high-pressure contexts. Some students acknowledged being aware of emotional distress while still engaging in substance use, indicating that awareness without regulation may be insufficient in high-pressure contexts.

4.3 Awareness of Emotional Triggers

Awareness of emotional triggers was assessed through items measuring identification of stressors and sources of discomfort. Mean scores for these items were consistently moderate, with identifying causes of anxiety or stress recording a mean of 3.44 (SD = 1.22) and awareness of stress or discomfort triggers recording a similar mean of 3.44 (SD = 1.26).

These values suggest that many students could identify situations that elicited negative emotional responses, particularly academic pressure and interpersonal conflict.

Qualitative data provided deeper insight into how emotional triggers interacted with environmental pressures. Teachers and counsellors described efforts to encourage students to pause, reflect, and identify triggers before reacting. Despite these efforts, students reported that intense academic pressure and peer reinforcement often overrode reflective capacity. Some participants described using substances such as cough syrup or prescription medications during examination periods to manage anxiety or sleep difficulties.

These accounts indicate that while trigger awareness exists, students often lack reliable strategies to translate awareness into adaptive coping. Emotional triggers therefore represent a critical point at which awareness must be supported by regulation skills and structured school-based interventions.

4.4 Emotional Expression

Emotional expression was measured through items assessing confidence in describing and communicating feelings. Students reported moderate confidence in emotional expression, with expressing feelings to others recording a mean of 3.43 (SD = 1.21) and the ability to describe emotions in detail recording a slightly lower mean of 3.33 (SD = 1.25). These scores indicate that while many students felt somewhat comfortable expressing emotions, detailed articulation remained challenging for a substantial proportion.

Qualitative findings revealed that emotional expression was constrained by social and cultural expectations, particularly norms discouraging emotional vulnerability. Counsellors noted that students, especially boys, often suppressed emotional distress to conform to peer expectations of strength or resilience.

Student accounts confirmed that fear of ridicule or social exclusion discouraged emotional disclosure. In such contexts, substances were sometimes used as alternative coping mechanisms. These findings suggest that emotional expression functions as an important link between awareness and regulation, but its protective role is weakened when school and peer environments do not support open emotional communication. These findings suggest that emotional expression functions as an important link between awareness and regulation, but

its protective role is weakened when school and peer environments do not support open emotional communication.

4.5 Self-Confidence in Emotional Regulation

Items assessing self-confidence in emotional regulation recorded the highest mean scores within the self-awareness scale. Reflecting on how emotions influence thoughts and actions recorded a mean of 3.50 (SD = 1.20), while noticing when emotions were about to change recorded a mean of 3.48 (SD = 1.28). Awareness of how emotions influence decision-making recorded a mean of 3.32 (SD = 1.22). These findings suggest emerging capacity for anticipatory regulation, though confidence varied across specific regulatory aspects.

Qualitative evidence indicated that self-confidence in emotional regulation was strengthened by supportive relationships and structured guidance. Teachers described cases where mindfulness practices and reflective conversations enabled students to resist peer pressure. Peer support also emerged as an important reinforcing factor, with students indicating that encouragement from trusted friends strengthened their ability to decline substance use. Peer support also emerged as an important reinforcing factor, with students indicating that encouragement from trusted friends strengthened their ability to decline substance use.

4.6 Inferential Analysis

To test the hypothesis that no significant relationship exists between self-awareness and substance use behaviour, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted.

Table 2: Pearson Correlations for Self-Awareness and Substance Use Behaviour

Variable	Self-Awareness	Substance Use
Self-Awareness	1	–.436**
Substance Use	–.436**	1

p < .001

The results indicate a strong negative correlation ($r = –.436$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that higher self-awareness is associated with lower substance use. Regression analysis further confirmed self-awareness as a significant predictor ($\beta = –.444$, $p < .001$), explaining substantial variance in substance use behaviour. Integrated with qualitative findings, these results suggest that emotional clarity, reflective capacity, and confidence collectively reduce vulnerability to substance use, although contextual pressures may moderate this effect.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Coefficients for EI Domains Predicting Substance Use Behaviour.

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	6.149	.314	—	19.612	.000	—	—
Self-Awareness	–.521	.050	–.444	–10.426	.000	.999	1.001
Self-Management	–.427	.049	–.368	–8.636	.000	.999	1.001
Social-Awareness	.026	.050	.022	0.523	.602	.998	1.002
Relationship Management	–.128	.048	–.114	–2.677	.008	.998	1.002

Self-awareness emerged as the strongest predictor in the model ($B = -0.521$, $SE = 0.050$, $\beta = -.444$, $t = -10.426$, $p < .001$). The negative standardized coefficient indicates that higher levels of self-awareness were associated with lower levels of substance use behaviour. The magnitude of the standardized coefficient reflects a moderate-to-large effect, suggesting meaningful practical significance.

The quantitative results position self-awareness as the most potent EI protective factor against adolescent substance use in this context, surpassing self-management in predictive strength despite both domains' significance. Qualitative findings complement this by revealing mechanisms: students with elevated self-awareness more readily identified distress triggers (e.g., peer pressure, academic stress) and anticipated consequences, facilitating resistance. However, protective effects were conditional; awareness without regulation confidence or supportive environments (e.g., open expression norms, mentorship) often proved insufficient, as evidenced by exam-period misuse narratives.

These patterns align with Goleman's (1995) theory, where self-awareness forms the foundation for subsequent regulation and adaptive decision-making, while also mediating peer-modelling influences per social learning principles (Bandura, 1977). The findings extend prior evidence from high-income settings (e.g., inverse EI-substance links) and emerging African studies by highlighting self-awareness's primacy in resource-limited Kenyan school contexts, where punitive approaches predominate over emotional skill-building.

4.7 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study investigated the association between self-awareness and substance use behaviour among secondary school students in Uasin Gishu County using an integrated mixed-methods design. Quantitative findings demonstrated that self-awareness was significantly and inversely related to substance use behaviour. In the regression model, self-awareness emerged as the strongest predictor ($B = -0.521$, $SE = 0.050$, $\beta = -.444$, $t = -10.426$, $p <$

.001), indicating that higher levels of emotional self-recognition were associated with lower levels of substance use. The hierarchical analysis further showed that emotional intelligence domains accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in substance use beyond demographic characteristics ($\Delta R^2 = .333$, $p < .001$). These results confirm the protective relevance of self-awareness within the school context.

The integrated findings indicate, however, that self-awareness does not function as an automatic safeguard against substance use. The qualitative evidence suggested that emotional recognition and awareness of internal triggers created opportunities for reflection, yet behavioural protection depended on the presence of regulatory confidence and supportive social contexts. Where emotional regulation skills were limited or peer norms favoured substance use, awareness alone was insufficient to prevent engagement. This pattern suggests that self-awareness operates as a conditional protective mechanism whose behavioural impact is strengthened when accompanied by effective regulation and constructive peer environments.

The findings contribute to theoretical refinement in two respects. First, within Emotional Intelligence Theory, the results indicate that intrapersonal awareness exerts its influence through interaction with regulation capacities rather than as an isolated trait. Second, from a Social Learning Theory perspective, emotional awareness appears to shape how students interpret and respond to peer modelling. Students with higher levels of self-awareness were better positioned to recognise emotional pressures arising from peer interactions and to disengage from substance-related behaviours despite exposure. In contrast, limited regulatory confidence increased susceptibility when emotional stress coincided with peer encouragement.

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the limitations of prevention strategies that rely predominantly on surveillance, disciplinary control, or information campaigns. Although such measures may suppress visible behaviour, they do not directly address the emotional processes that often precede substance use. Interventions that systematically cultivate emotional awareness, reflective capacity, and regulation skills are therefore more likely to produce sustainable outcomes. Integrating emotional literacy into classroom practices, guidance and counselling services, and peer-support initiatives may enhance students' ability to manage stress and resist maladaptive coping strategies.

Several limitations warrant consideration. The design restricts causal interpretation, and reliance on self-report measures introduces the possibility of social desirability bias. The focus on Form Three students within a single county limits generalisability to other educational contexts. Longitudinal research is recommended to examine developmental trajectories linking emotional awareness and substance use over time. Experimental or quasi-experimental intervention studies would further clarify whether structured self-awareness programmes produce measurable reductions in substance use across diverse school settings.

In summary, the evidence indicates that self-awareness constitutes a significant and meaningful protective factor against substance use among secondary school students, although its effectiveness depends on regulatory competence and social reinforcement. These findings extend theoretical understanding, provide empirical support for emotionally grounded prevention approaches, and offer practical direction for school-based interventions within Kenya and comparable educational contexts.

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