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CELEBRATORY RISK CULTURE AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN YOUTH: ASSESSING THE “PENS DOWN” PHENOMENON AND ITS SOCIO-HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

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ABSTRACT:

The “Pens Down” tradition, parties held by South African students at the end of their exams, has become a culturally entrenched rite of passage. While these gatherings symbolize freedom and achievement, mounting evidence links them to excessive alcohol consumption, underage drinking, and serious safety risks, including fatal accidents. This article uses a desk-based review methodology to examine the emergence, drivers, and impacts of the Pens Down phenomenon among South African youth. Drawing on recent peer-reviewed studies, government reports, and civil society commentary, the paper explores how accessibility of alcohol, peer influence, and risky celebratory norms converge to produce harmful outcomes. Key findings suggest that underage and binge drinking is pervasive among secondary and tertiary, that environments near schools facilitate alcohol use, and that intense celebratory events following exams can escalate to violence and tragedy (e.g., the Enyobeni Tavern tragedy). The discussion situates these observations in relation to social learning theory and risk-taking frameworks. Finally, we propose practical recommendations: scaling up youth-led alcohol-harm reduction campaigns, strengthening regulation of alcohol sales near schools, and promoting alternative, non-alcoholic modes of celebration. The article concludes with a

call for continued monitoring and research on the Pens Down culture, emphasizing that meaningful change requires coordinated effort across communities, schools, and policy actors.

KEYWORDS: celebratory culture; Pens Down; risk behaviour; South Africa, youth alcohol.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In South Africa, the end of the examination season, particularly for Grade 12 (matric) learners and final-year university students, is widely celebrated as a milestone. Among these celebrations, “Pens Down” parties have emerged as an increasingly visible and culturally significant phenomenon. These gatherings mark the symbolic moment when students put down their pens for the last time, signifying the closure of academic pressures and the beginning of freedom. For many young South Africans, Pens Down represents a rite of passage. However, while such celebrations may appear innocuous, indeed festive and liberating, they are not without growing concern. Parents, educators, public-health advocates, and policymakers are increasingly alarmed by the links between Pens Down events and excessive alcohol consumption, underage drinking, and serious safety risks. The magnitude of the problem merits serious attention. Alcohol use among South African youth is alarmingly high, and risky behaviours such as binge drinking remain deeply entrenched. According to recent demographic data, nearly half of young men aged 15–34 report having consumed alcohol in their past, and for those aged 15–19, the rates are striking: about 45.5% of males and 23.4% of females in this age bracket report having ever drunk alcohol (Statistics South Africa, 2020). Moreover, national policy data confirm that harmful, high-volume “heavy episodic” drinking remains common in the country (South African Government Gazette, 2023).

Adolescent brains are particularly vulnerable to the effects of alcohol. As noted by Health-E, alcohol consumption during the teenage years can impair cognitive development, weaken rational planning, and increase risk-taking tendencies, rendering young people more susceptible to accidents, violence, and poor decision-making (Health-E, 2023). The social costs are significant: non-natural causes such as accidents and interpersonal violence contribute disproportionately to mortality in the 15–19 age group in South Africa (Health-E, 2023). Furthermore, the cultural dimension of Pens Down celebrations has been spotlighted by tragic incidents. A devastating case is the Enyobeni Tavern disaster in June 2022, during a

Pens Down-style gathering, where 21 young people lost their lives amid reports of overcrowding, underage attendance, and inadequate safety controls (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). While Wikipedia is not a scholarly source, the event has been widely documented by reputable news outlets, and it underscores a deeper public-health and regulatory failure: when alcohol-laden youth celebrations spiral out of control, the results can be catastrophic.

Beyond isolated tragedies, the Pens Down phenomenon reflects broader social and environmental dynamics that facilitate risky drinking among young people. Research has shown that high school learners in peri-urban South African settings frequently have easy access to alcohol: many reports purchasing alcohol at taverns or bottle stores without being asked for an identity document, and they consume alcohol at social gatherings, parties, and within their communities (Hasheena et al., 2021). Social motivations also play a role: young people often drink to cope with negative emotions, to bond with peers, or because of peer pressure, despite being aware of the health risks (Hasheena et al., 2021). Societal and normative influences intensify the problem. Underage drinking is not only socially normalized but also structurally supported by an environment that enables youth access to alcohol. A recent survey by AWARE.org (reported by TimesLIVE) found that more than a third of South African youth aged between 11 and 17 have consumed alcohol, and that peer-led, story-driven educational interventions are more effective than fear-based messages in changing youth attitudes (TimesLIVE, 2025). The same report suggests that prevention efforts must be finely tuned: younger adolescents respond to messages emphasizing connection, while older teens favor messaging that is more future-oriented.

The historical and societal context deepens the urgency. According to the *South African Child Gauge*, alcohol use is the leading risk factor for adolescents aged 15–19, significantly contributing to impulsivity, injury, and death (Parry & Bantjes, 2021/2022). Coupled with a regulatory environment where liquor outlet density is high and enforcement uneven, youth drinking persists as a serious public-health challenge (South African Government Gazette, 2023). Taken together, these factors frame the Pens Down phenomenon as more than celebration. It is a social ritual embedded in risk culture, shaped by access, desire for social affirmation, and weak regulatory controls. The problem demands a nuanced analysis, one that recognizes the symbolic value of Pens Down while also acknowledging its potential for harm.

Objective and Significance of the Study

This article aims to investigate the Pens Down phenomenon from a socio-health perspective. Specifically, it will (1) examine the historical emergence and cultural importance of Pens Down parties, (2) identify the social and environmental drivers that elevate the risk of harm during these celebrations, and (3) assess the short- and long-term health and safety implications associated with them. The analysis is significant because it brings critical public-health issues into dialogue with youth culture in South Africa. Rather than simply condemning youth celebrations, the article intends to highlight underlying vulnerabilities and to propose harm-reduction strategies that respect youth agency while safeguarding their well-being.

Research Questions

1. What social, cultural, and environmental factors drive the popularity and prevalence of Pens Down celebrations among South African youth?
2. What health and safety risks, particularly those related to alcohol consumption, are associated with Pens Down parties?
3. What interventions, policy measures, or community practices exist or could be developed to reduce the harmful consequences of Pens Down celebrations without stigmatizing youth?

By synthesizing current data and literature, this paper seeks to fill a gap in academic discourse: while much has been written about youth drinking in general, far less attention has been paid to the ritualized, celebratory practices that amplify risk at key transitional moments, such as the end of exams. Understanding this phenomenon is crucial not only for public-health policy but also for educators, community leaders, and young people themselves, anyone invested in ensuring that celebration does not come at the cost of safety.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Alcohol Use among South African Youth

Alcohol consumption among young people in South Africa is well established as a major public-health concern, with evidence pointing to both high prevalence and deeply embedded risk behaviors. A socio-demographic study of university students conducted by Lategan, du Preez, and Pentz (2024) found that hazardous and harmful drinking is common in higher-education settings. Their survey ($n = 474$) used the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test

(AUDIT), and revealed significant variation by gender, age, income, and drinking patterns. Male students reported more frequent binge drinking, and consumption was strongly tied to level of disposable income and preferred beverage type (Lategan et al., 2024). These findings suggest that among tertiary students, alcohol behavior is not homogeneous; rather, it is influenced by socio-economic status and gender. Among adolescents in high schools, risk factors have been systematically studied in township contexts. Mmereki, Mathibe, Cele, and Modjadji (2022) investigated four high schools in township areas of Tshwane and found that 48% of surveyed learners (mean age ~16 years) reported current alcohol use. Their multivariate analysis identified several strong predictors: grade repetition, working during spare time, accessing pocket money, age, and cigarette smoking were all significantly associated with alcohol consumption (Mmereki et al., 2022). Particularly, learners who repeated a grade were more likely to drink, which may reflect both psychosocial stress and lower school engagement. Early onset of drinking is also a concern. A study of primary-school-aged adolescents (ages 9-15) in Johannesburg revealed that although nearly all respondents understood that children “should not” consume alcohol, 13.5% admitted to having already tried alcohol (Morapeli, 2024). The fact that this use occurs in very young children emphasizes the pervasiveness of alcohol in their environments and the limitations of merely educating youth about its harms; behavioral uptake is already happening before many interventions even begin. These epidemiological findings are consistent with national health assessments. The *South African Child Gauge 2021/2022* highlights alcohol as the leading risk factor for adolescents aged 15–19, linking use to impulsivity, injury, and non-natural death (Parry & Bantjes, 2022). The report stresses that adolescent alcohol use is not a marginal issue; it drives serious health and social harm during a critical developmental period (Parry & Bantjes, 2022). Further compounding the problem is the accessibility of alcohol. According to the South African Government Gazette (2023), liquor outlets are densely distributed: there is approximately one outlet for every 190 people. The same report notes that heavy episodic drinking persists, particularly in rural and lower socio-economic areas, making underage and harmful drinking more likely (Government Gazette, 2023).

Risk-Taking and Celebratory Culture

While the data above deal primarily with prevalence, risk, and demographics, there is a less well-articulated but increasingly important theme in the literature: the role of celebratory culture in amplifying risky drinking among young people. This is especially relevant to “Pens Down” parties and other post-exam rituals. Although “celebratory risk culture” as a formal

academic concept is not yet well codified in peer-reviewed literature, civil society organisations and policy papers have recognized its importance. For instance, the Gauteng Department of Health and Social Development in a thematic paper links substance use, especially alcohol, with gender-based violence in youth contexts, noting that alcohol often serves as a catalyst for violent behaviour during youth celebrations (Gauteng Health, 2023). The report points to heavy drinking as a structural issue tied not just to individual behaviour but to community-level norms around substance use and gender. Media studies and advocacy have also emphasized how the ritualization of youth celebrations can normalize excessive drinking. Although not yet thoroughly studied in academic journals, this notion is receiving increasing public attention: youth-led campaigns argue that post-exam celebrations have become almost synonymous with heavy alcohol consumption, and repeat calls are made for “safe celebrations” rather than risk-laden gatherings. These observations resonate with broader developmental theory. Adolescence and young adulthood are periods marked by elevated risk-taking, driven by biological, social, and cognitive factors. The context of celebration, a socially sanctioned moment of release, offers ripe conditions for risk behaviours to occur and proliferate. Social learning theory suggests that young people observe and internalize the behaviour of peers, especially in group settings, reinforcing norms that associate celebration with intoxication. Over time, these behaviours consolidate into ritualized patterns.

Health, Safety, and Social Risks: Road Accidents, Sexual Risk, and Gender-Based Violence

Road Accidents and Injury Risk

Alcohol consumption among youth is not merely a health issue in isolation; it intersects with broader safety risks, particularly road traffic injuries. According to the *South African Health Review* (2023), road accident fatalities remain high, with many involving young people (Health Systems Trust, 2023). While the report does not always disaggregate by age and alcohol use, the confluence of youth, alcohol, and driving is well supported by international evidence and local policy concerns. Heavy episodic drinking, common among young people, increases the risk of impaired driving, a well-documented pathway to fatal road accidents. Even though comprehensive local data on youth drink-driving remains limited, the regulatory and public-health frameworks clearly link harmful alcohol consumption to traffic fatalities (Government Gazette, 2023).

Sexual Risk Behaviour

Alcohol use has also been shown to predict risky sexual behavior (RSB) among South African youth. A cross-sectional study conducted in the Western Cape by University of the Western Cape researchers (Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health, 2023) found that alcohol consumption was a significant predictor of RSB in young adults aged 18–25. The study used the AUDIT and a self-report risky sexual behaviors scale, and found that alcohol use accounted for a considerable portion of variance in RSB (Ivory et al., 2023). In particular, men demonstrated higher levels of heavy episodic drinking, and those levels correlated with increased risky sexual activity (Ivory et al., 2023). A qualitative counterpart to this research further illuminates how young people understand this link in their everyday lives. Carels, Florence, Adams, Sinclair, and Savahl (2022) conducted focus groups with 18–25-year-olds in low-income Western Cape communities and found that participants often associated alcohol with disinhibition, lowered judgment, and unplanned or unsafe sexual encounters. These youth acknowledged that after drinking, they were more likely to take sexual risks (Carels et al., 2022). These insights underscore that drinking behavior among young people is not confined to the private or solitary sphere, it operates within social contexts where sexuality, peer influence, and identity are deeply interwoven.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Perhaps the most concerning intersection is between youth alcohol use and gender-based violence (GBV). Multiple sources in recent literature highlight this nexus. A comprehensive evidence review by the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) and the Southern African Alcohol Policy Alliance (SAAPA) demonstrates a clear link between harmful alcohol use and GBV perpetration (SAMRC & SAAPA, 2021). According to the review, men's harmful drinking tripled their risk of perpetrating intimate partner violence (IPV), and women whose partners were frequently drunk were almost six times more likely to suffer IPV (SAMRC & SAAPA, 2021). The authors underscore that alcohol availability, particularly high outlet density, is a structural driver of this violence (SAMRC & SAAPA, 2021). More recently, the first national Gender-Based Violence Study in South Africa (2022) reported by the HSRC found that alcohol consumption plays a significant role in GBV patterns. The report notes that many perpetrators of physical, sexual, and emotional violence reported consuming alcohol prior to or during incidents (HSRC, 2024). These findings affirm that alcohol is not just a compounding factor but a substantial risk marker in GBV dynamics. At the relational level, a mixed-methods study of young couples in urban informal settlements in

Durban found multiple pathways linking drinking and violence (Smith et al., 2024). Women described incidents where men, intoxicated, instigated arguments, excused abuse by claiming disinhibition, or exercised coercive control, blaming their drinking for aggressive behavior (Smith et al., 2024). Men's alcohol consumption was also described as diverting financial resources, leading to conflict, and as a signifier of masculinity. Public drinking, particularly in taverns, served as a space where control over female partners was reinforced (Smith et al., 2024). Adding to the qualitative depth, a formative study by Ramsoomar et al. (2025) delved into how women experience severe IPV in alcohol-related contexts. Interviewed women described how their partners deliberately instigated fights when under the influence, restricted their movement, enacted economic abuse, and sometimes attempted femicide after drinking. The study also noted how harmful drinking intersected with gender norms: men's alcohol use was often socially validated as part of masculinity, particularly in taverns, reinforcing cycles of control and aggression (Ramsoomar et al., 2025). These patterns suggest that alcohol is more than a trigger for violence: it is woven into relational dynamics, socio-cultural norms, and gendered expressions of power.

Policy and Harm-Reduction Responses

Given the scope and severity of alcohol-related risks among youth, policymakers and civil society organisations have increasingly prioritized harm-reduction strategies, although significant challenges persist.

Regulatory Context

South Africa's regulatory framework on alcohol is complex and geographically uneven. According to the Government Gazette (2023), the country maintains numerous liquor outlets, and enforcement of trading hours and sales restrictions remains inconsistent. The Gazette also explicitly recognizes that harmful alcohol use contributes to social violence, including gender-based violence, and that the negative social impact of alcohol use must be addressed through licensing, density control, and other policy levers (Government Gazette, 2023). At the provincial level, thematic policy papers also acknowledge the dual role of alcohol in social harm and celebration. For example, a report by Gauteng Health (2023) links alcohol abuse to both interpersonal violence and community-level trauma, especially in youth contexts. The report suggests that interventions must account for the cyclical relationship between substance use and violence, and that licensing policy should not only regulate access but also consider social dynamics such as GBV (Gauteng Health, 2023).

Prevention and Community Responses

On the community front, non-profit organisations and youth-led campaigns are seeking to reimagine youth celebrations in healthier ways. Although academic studies on the “Pens Down” trend are scarce, advocacy groups have called for safe, alcohol-free alternatives embedded in youth agency and social connection. These interventions emphasize peer networks, education, and the creation of culturally appropriate rituals that provide the social reward of celebration without the cost of harm. Policy discussions have also suggested enforcement of outlet licensing near schools. The SAMRC/SAAAPA review (2021) recommended tighter regulation of outlet density and trading hours, given their strong association with both harmful drinking and GBV. However, implementation remains patchy, pointing to governance and resource gaps.

Research Gaps and Emerging Needs

Despite these efforts, there remain serious gaps in both research and policy. First, few peer-reviewed studies explicitly examine celebratory practices like Pens Down as distinct phenomena, even though these ritualized events likely operate under different dynamics than everyday drinking. The societal and symbolic dimensions of such gatherings remain underexplored in academic literature. Second, interventions targeting youth often rely on traditional education-based models, which may not sufficiently address the normative and ritualized dimensions of celebratory risk culture. There is a need for community-based interventions that engage youth in co-constructing safer forms of celebration, rather than imposing abstinence models. Third, data linking youth alcohol use to road traffic accidents and GBV are often cross-sectional or ecological; longitudinal research is needed to better understand causal mechanisms, trajectories, and effective policy levers. Finally, gender-sensitive approaches remain critical. The evidence clearly shows that alcohol-related harm is gendered: men’s drinking is linked to violence, while women often bear the consequences. Tailored interventions that consider power, masculinity, social norms, and trauma are urgently required.

The Gap in Literature: Pens Down and Ritualized Celebration

While alcohol use among youth in South Africa has been extensively studied, including epidemiological prevalence, risk factors, and policy implications, very few academic works directly address the phenomenon of Pens Down celebrations. The literature tends to focus on general risk behaviours, such as adolescent initiation into drinking (Mmereki et al., 2022),

binge drinking among university students (Lategan et al., 2024), and the social determinants of consumption, but does not systematically investigate the unique dynamics of exam-finish rituals. This represents a notable gap. Pens Down parties are not merely spontaneous gatherings; they are ritualized, socially significant moments embedded in youth identity, peer culture, and collective memory. They provide a symbolic transition between structured academic life and the uncertainty of adulthood. Because of this, the behaviours, motivations, and risks at Pens Down celebrations may differ from everyday drinking. Yet academic researchers have not sufficiently conceptualized or operationalized these events as a distinct phenomenon. Moreover, existing harm-reduction and policy frameworks often do not explicitly mention celebratory contexts. While regulatory strategies target outlet density, licensing, and trading hours, they rarely address how youth celebrations create spatial and temporal spikes in consumption and risk. Similarly, community interventions tend to emphasise general alcohol education or GBV prevention, without addressing the ritualized social power of post-exam celebration. In summary, the gap in literature lies at the intersection of youth culture, ritualized celebration, and risk: researchers and policymakers have paid attention to prevalence, but less to meaning. Understanding Pens Down as a social ritual, and not just as a high-risk drinking event, offers both conceptual enrichment and practical leverage for harm-reduction.

Summary

The existing literature strongly documents that alcohol use among South African youth is common, risky, and socially embedded. Adolescents and university students alike report high levels of consumption, with strong associations between socio-demographic variables (age, gender, income), accessibility of alcohol, and psychosocial stressors. The risk is not confined to long-term health; it extends into immediate social harms, including road accidents, risky sexual behaviour, and gender-based violence. Furthermore, although the concept of celebratory, ritualized risk behaviour, such as Pens Down parties, remains under-researched, it is widely recognised in policy and advocacy domains as a site of heightened alcohol use and vulnerability. Policy responses have begun to reflect this, but gaps remain in regulation, community-level engagement, and longitudinal research. Addressing these gaps will require a holistic, culturally informed, and gender-aware approach. Scholarly work must engage with Pens Down not only as a public-health problem but as a social ritual that embodies youth identity and collective meaning. In doing so, interventions can better resonate with young

people's lived experiences and potentially redirect the culture of celebration toward safer, more sustainable practices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper draws primarily on Social Learning Theory and Risk-Taking Theory to interpret the Pens Down trend.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that individuals learn behaviours by observing others within their social environment. Applied here, young people may internalize celebratory drinking as normative when they see peers at Pens Down parties, social media depictions, or older youth modelling risky behaviour. Peer influence is particularly salient during adolescence, a development stage strongly shaped by group norms (Bandura, 1977).

Risk-Taking Theory emphasizes that adolescence is characterized by heightened willingness to engage in risky behaviours due to neurological, social, and psychological factors (Steinberg, 2008). In the context of Pens Down events, this may manifest as binge drinking, crowding in unsafe venues, and disregard for safety norms. The combination of euphoria, perceived invulnerability, and peer reinforcement can escalate risk.

Together, these theories help explain why Pens Down celebrations are not merely festive: they function as ritualized sites of learned behaviour and risk expression.

METHODOLOGY

Given the sensitive nature of studying youth and underage drinking, this article adopts a desk-based literature review design. It synthesizes existing peer-reviewed studies, government documents, organizational reports, and credible media sources. No primary data are collected; hence the study does not require ethical clearance.

- Data Sources: Academic databases (PubMed, Google Scholar), official government reports (South African government gazettes), non-profit organisation websites (AWARE.org), and reputable media coverage.
- Selection Criteria: Publications from 2021 to 2025, focusing on youth alcohol behavior in South Africa, celebratory drinking, underage risk, and policy or campaign responses.
- Analysis Technique: Thematic synthesis. Key themes—drivers of Pens Down party behaviour, health and safety risks, and interventions—are identified, categorized, and discussed in relation to theory.

RESULTS

Drivers of the Pens Down Phenomenon

Cultural Ritualisation and the Construction of Youth Identity

The results indicate that the Pens Down phenomenon has evolved into a cultural ritual that holds symbolic meaning for young people transitioning out of formal schooling. Although formal academic literature on this specific ritual remains limited, there is extensive media analysis and civil society commentary illustrating how these celebrations have become embedded within youth identity formation. Lifestyle & Tech (2025) describes Pens Down as a “marker of liberation,” anchored in the collective excitement that accompanies the completion of high-stakes examinations. For many learners, Pens Down is not merely a social event but a cultural signal that they have successfully navigated one of the most stressful periods of their academic lives. This ritualisation appears to follow patterns documented in broader youth culture research, where rites of passage play an important role in helping adolescents negotiate identity, social belonging, and a sense of achievement. UNICEF South Africa (2024) notes that young people often attach meaning to group-based milestones as a strategy for building collective identity, particularly in contexts where everyday stressors are high. Because matric examinations represent a high-pressure academic environment, the desire to celebrate is intensified, creating a cultural expectation around participating in Pens Down gatherings. This cultural ritualisation acts as a primary driver of participation regardless of the associated risks.

Peer Influence, Social Norms, and Models of Celebration

Across the reviewed sources, peer influence emerges as one of the strongest forces shaping participation in Pens Down events. Research consistently shows that social norms play a decisive role in adolescent drinking behaviour. Lategan, du Preez and Pentz (2024) found that students viewed alcohol as a normal and often expected part of socialising, especially in contexts associated with stress relief or celebration. Once a culture of alcohol-based celebration is established within peer groups, it becomes self-reinforcing. Participation is driven by a mixture of social modelling, fear of exclusion, and a desire for approval from peers who are perceived to be engaging in similar behaviours. AWARE.org (2023) confirms that youth often interpret Pens Down as a symbol of social freedom and adulthood. In such environments, alcohol becomes a signifier of maturity and an entry point into a more adult social world. These shifts in perceived social status contribute to high participation rates, even among underage learners. Media reporting (Lifestyle & Tech, 2025) suggests that many

young people feel pressure to attend Pens Down events to avoid social isolation, with abstention sometimes interpreted as a lack of confidence or unwillingness to be part of the peer group. This peer-driven environment increases vulnerability to risk. The high emotional intensity surrounding the end of exams, combined with a group of adolescents engaging in collective celebration, reinforces the normalisation of alcohol as a necessary component of “having fun.” These results align with broader findings from national youth reports, which identify peer-led environments as high-risk settings for underage drinking and risk-taking behaviour (UNICEF South Africa, 2024).

Accessibility of Alcohol and Environmental Drivers

A persistent structural driver of Pens Down-related risk is the accessibility of alcohol to underage learners. Lategan et al. (2024) report that many outlets in close proximity to schools do not consistently enforce age restrictions. In their study, a large proportion of high school respondents indicated that they could purchase alcohol without being asked for identification. Such findings are consistent with previous research showing that South Africa has a high density of liquor outlets in both urban and peri-urban areas. According to the South African Government Gazette (2023), the country continues to struggle with heavy episodic drinking in environments characterised by high outlet density, particularly in rural provinces. Environmental accessibility extends beyond physical outlets. Many Pens Down events are hosted in informal venues with limited adult supervision, including private homes, open fields, or makeshift spaces where enforcement of age restrictions is virtually non-existent. In addition, alcohol is often supplied by older peers, siblings, or community members. This access undermines law enforcement efforts and normalises early alcohol exposure among young people. The ease of access to alcohol, combined with the cultural pressure to celebrate, creates a perfect storm for excessive consumption. This structural problem is compounded by socioeconomic conditions. Research by UNICEF South Africa (2024) shows that young people facing psychosocial stressors, including poverty, household instability, and academic pressure, are more likely to engage in substance use when alcohol is easily accessible. Pens Down celebrations thus occur in a context where environmental and emotional vulnerabilities intersect.

Psychosocial Motivations: Stress Relief, Self-Esteem, and Social Reward

A recurring theme in the results is the role of psychosocial motivations in driving alcohol consumption during Pens Down events. Lategan et al. (2024) found that high school learners

often drink to relieve stress, to enhance self-esteem, or to strengthen social connections. These motivations are intensified during transition periods such as the completion of exams. Adolescents experience a surge of emotional release and often turn to alcohol as a mechanism for managing months of academic pressure. Health-E (2023) confirms that adolescents often use alcohol as a coping mechanism for negative emotions. This is problematic because adolescence is a developmental stage characterised by heightened sensitivity to stress, reward-seeking behaviour, and diminished impulse control. The neurobiological vulnerability of adolescents makes them more susceptible to making impulsive decisions, particularly in alcohol-saturated environments. As a result, the psychosocial drivers behind Pens Down celebrations are closely linked to the health and safety risks that accompany them. Young people also associate alcohol consumption with increased social confidence. The desire for social reward, such as gaining approval from friends or being seen as “fun”, can override caution and lead to high-risk behaviours. This finding corresponds with UNICEF South Africa’s (2024) observation that adolescents often conflate risk-taking with social success. Such psychosocial drivers magnify the dangers inherent in Pens Down celebrations.

Health and Safety Risks Associated with the Pens Down Phenomenon

Underage and Binge Drinking

Empirical evidence consistently shows that Pens Down celebrations create favourable conditions for both underage and binge drinking. Zwane et al. (2022) report high levels of alcohol consumption among secondary school learners in Mpumalanga, with the prevalence of binge drinking notably elevated. Since Pens Down events typically involve unsupervised gatherings, they amplify these already-existing risk behaviours. Binge drinking among adolescents is particularly dangerous due to the physical and psychological vulnerabilities associated with the developmental period. Adolescents metabolise alcohol differently than adults and are far more susceptible to acute intoxication. Such levels of consumption increase the likelihood of injuries, violence, impaired driving, and other harmful consequences. In addition, underage drinking elevates long-term risks. UNICEF South Africa (2024) highlights evidence that early initiation into alcohol consumption increases the likelihood of dependence later in life. Pens Down, therefore, is not only a public safety concern but also a potential gateway into long-term public health challenges.

Adolescent Brain Vulnerability and Impaired Judgment

Health-E (2023) reports that alcohol poses severe developmental risks to adolescents. Consumption during this stage can impair brain regions responsible for memory, decision-making, and impulse control. These developmental vulnerabilities help explain why adolescents at Pens Down events often engage in impulsive behaviours such as unsafe sex, physical altercations, vandalism, and experimenting with other substances.

The risk extends beyond immediate impairment. Adolescents exposed to high levels of alcohol during brain maturation experience heightened susceptibility to neurotoxicity, which can result in long-term cognitive difficulties. Because Pens Down events often involve drinking over extended hours and across multiple locations, the cumulative exposure during a single celebration may be substantial. This vulnerability intersects with social dynamics. Adolescents may overestimate their ability to make rational decisions while intoxicated, resulting in violence, accidents, and other emergencies. Health-E (2023) notes that non-natural causes of death, including injury, assault, and accidents, are among the leading causes of mortality in adolescents aged 15–19 in South Africa. Pens Down celebrations, when poorly supervised, may heighten exposure to these risks.

Tragic Incidents and Extreme Outcomes

The risks associated with the Pens Down phenomenon become most visible when examining extreme incidents that expose the structural vulnerabilities surrounding youth celebrations in South Africa. One of the most widely publicised examples is the Enyobeni Tavern disaster that occurred in East London in June 2022. Although investigations highlighted multiple contributory factors such as poor ventilation, capacity violations, and possible exposure to harmful substances, what remains uncontested is that the gathering was a Pens Down-style celebration involving predominantly underage learners (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). Twenty-one adolescents died during the event, prompting intense national scrutiny of youth safety, unmonitored celebrations, and the broader failures in alcohol governance and enforcement. While debates continue regarding toxicological findings and the exact cause of death, the tragedy illuminated deeper systemic issues. The presence of adolescents in a licensed venue during a high-risk celebratory period exposed gaps in compliance monitoring within the alcohol retail sector. These gaps have been repeatedly highlighted in public health and community safety literature, which notes that enforcement of underage drinking laws remains inconsistent and often undermined by resource constraints and local-level regulatory

weaknesses (Eastern Cape Liquor Board, 2024; South African Government, 2023). The Enyobeni case thus reinforces concerns that many licensed establishments continue to prioritise profit over legal and safety obligations, especially during peak youth activity periods such as end-of-year examinations.

Research on adolescent alcohol consumption in South Africa consistently links risky environments, weak supervision, and high alcohol availability to harmful outcomes including injury, violence, and mortality (Hasheena et al., 2021; Mmereki et al., 2022). The Pens Down context amplifies these risks because it combines celebration, peer pressure, limited adult oversight, and commercial interests. Studies show that young people in peri-urban and township settings are particularly vulnerable due to high densities of alcohol outlets situated near schools and recreational spaces, coupled with ineffective enforcement of licensing conditions (Osuafor et al., 2023; UNICEF South Africa, 2024). The Enyobeni incident demonstrated how these structural factors converge to create unsafe environments for youth. The tragedy also reflects broader social patterns in which young people increasingly celebrate milestones in commercial venues rather than supervised community or school settings. Research indicates that adolescents are more likely to engage in excessive drinking when celebrations occur in venues that market aggressively to youth or that lack adequate monitoring and safety standards (Lategan et al., 2024). The commercialisation of Pens Down celebrations, often driven by clubs and taverns advertising targeted events for matric learners, contributes to environments where regulatory breaches become likely and harm escalates.

Moreover, the Enyobeni incident renewed national debate about the responsibilities of multiple stakeholders. Law enforcement agencies were criticised for insufficient oversight, local governments for inadequate monitoring of premises, and communities for normalising youth access to alcohol. Scholars argue that tragedies of this nature reflect failures not only at the level of individual behaviour but within systems of governance that should regulate alcohol availability and youth protection (Health Systems Trust, 2023; World Health Organization, 2024). The event served as a stark reminder that unregulated youth gatherings during high-stakes celebratory periods can result in catastrophic loss of life. It is important to recognise that Enyobeni is not an isolated case but rather the most visible manifestation of a broader pattern of risk linked to Pens Down celebrations. Reports from provincial departments and civil society organisations highlight frequent cases of road accidents, assaults, gender-based violence, and alcohol poisoning during the post-examination period

(Gauteng Department of Health and Social Development, 2023; AWARE.org, 2024). While not all cases attract national attention, they demonstrate an ongoing cycle where celebratory culture intersects with systemic weaknesses to produce preventable harm. The Enyobeni tragedy therefore stands as a critical case study illustrating how the convergence of underage drinking, commercial incentives, inadequate regulation, and cultural celebration practices can lead to fatal outcomes. It underscores the need for stronger regulatory oversight, community involvement, and youth-centred harm-reduction strategies to prevent similar incidents in the future.

Gender-Based Violence, Bullying, and Sexual Risk

Multiple sources highlight the association between youth drinking environments and increased vulnerability to gender-based violence (GBV). UNICEF South Africa (2024) reports that alcohol is frequently implicated in incidents of sexual assault, coercion, and harassment among adolescents. Because Pens Down gatherings often lack formal supervision and rely heavily on peer management, the likelihood of GBV increases. Alcohol impairs judgment for both victims and perpetrators. Intoxicated adolescents may be less able to defend themselves or identify dangerous situations. At the same time, perpetrators may become more aggressive or exploit vulnerabilities. These findings correspond with Health-E (2023), which highlights that adolescent alcohol use heightens the risk of sexual exploitation and interpersonal violence. Cases of bullying and humiliation, including cyberbullying after Pens Down events, have also been documented informally. Videos of intoxicated learners, fights, and humiliating acts are often shared on social media, further entrenching harm and long-term psychological impact.

Road Accidents and Transport Risks

Alcohol-related road incidents remain a major public health issue in South Africa. According to the South African Government Gazette (2023), heavy episodic drinking contributes significantly to traffic fatalities, particularly among young males. Pens Down celebrations intensify transport risks because adolescents often travel between multiple venues while intoxicated, rely on unlicensed drivers, or make use of overcrowded or unsafe vehicles. Given that many Pens Down events begin in the afternoon and continue late into the night, visibility and fatigue compound the risks. The vulnerability is especially pronounced in rural provinces where access to safe transport options is limited.

Regulatory Weakness and Governance Gaps

The Government Gazette (2023) highlights persistent challenges in regulating alcohol distribution and enforcing age restrictions. Liquor authorities face limited capacity, inconsistent monitoring, and overlapping jurisdictional responsibilities. These weaknesses allow informal Pens Down activities to flourish. The Eastern Cape Liquor Board (ECLB Annual Report, 2024) acknowledges that enforcement of youth-focused alcohol regulations remains inconsistent. High outlet density, limited community reporting, and resource constraints exacerbate the problem. These regulatory weaknesses form one of the strongest structural predictors of Pens Down-related harm.

Interventions and Responses

Youth-Led Campaigning and Narrative Shifts

One of the most promising findings is the emergence of youth-led initiatives promoting safer celebration. AWARE.org's "Celebrate. Pause. Dream." campaign encourages learners to redefine celebration in ways that do not rely on alcohol. According to Lifestyle & Tech (2025), the campaign uses peer ambassadors and narrative storytelling to shift perceptions around drinking. Early evaluations indicate that young people respond more positively to empowerment messages than to fear-based warnings. UNICEF South Africa (2024) similarly emphasises that youth-focused interventions are most successful when they centre youth voices, encourage agency, and validate the social motivations behind celebration while offering safer alternatives.

Regulatory Advocacy and Provincial Interventions

The ECLB has been one of the most vocal regulatory bodies in discouraging Pens Down gatherings. Its anti-Pens Down campaign includes school visits, radio messaging, and community mobilization aimed at reducing underage drinking (ECLB Annual Report, 2024). These campaigns recognise the cultural significance of Pens Down but caution against high-risk gatherings. While these interventions represent progress, the results indicate that enforcement efforts cannot keep pace with the scale of youth celebrations across the province. The ECLB acknowledges that compliance by liquor outlets remains variable.

Public Messaging and Community-Based Prevention

AWARE.org (2023) issues seasonal advisories targeting parents, school authorities, and community leaders. These advisories recommend supervision strategies, early

communication with learners, and coordinated community responses. Public messaging efforts also emphasise the role of parents in modelling responsible behaviour. Community policing forums in several provinces have reportedly adopted informal strategies such as monitoring high-risk venues, conducting random patrols, and engaging with tavern owners during exam periods. Although fragmented, these efforts show that community-driven approaches can contribute meaningfully to harm reduction when institutional enforcement is limited.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review suggest that the *Pens Down* phenomenon is not merely a benign celebration at the end of exams, but rather a culturally embedded practice shaped by social, environmental, and regulatory forces that together amplify various risks. In critically interpreting these results, we can draw on Social Learning Theory and Risk-Taking Theory to understand how youth internalize harmful norms, as well as to guide more effective, youth-centred interventions.

Cultural Embedding and Social Learning

Social Learning Theory posits that individuals acquire behaviour through observation, imitation, and modelling of others in their environment, especially peers and older role models (Bandura, 1977). In the context of *Pens Down*, young people learn to associate end-of-exam celebrations with heavy alcohol use by observing older students, social media depictions, and peer groups. The ritualisation of *Pens Down* solidifies these associations. Media outlets and civil society frequently describe *Pens Down* as a “rite of passage” for adolescents, a symbolic transition into adulthood and collective freedom (Lifestyle & Tech, 2025). This cultural embedding is highly consequential. Because the behaviour is socially sanctioned and widely visible, young people internalize it as normative. When exam season ends, peer pressure and expectation converge: celebrating with alcohol is not just accepted, but expected. In such an environment, refusing to join or to drink can be socially costly. This aligns with evidence that youth drinking behaviour is often peer-driven and that group dynamics strongly influence whether adolescents engage in alcohol use (Lategan, du Preez, & Pentz, 2024). Moreover, exposure to alcohol norms via media further reinforces these internalized behaviours. Advertising and social media amplifies the visibility of drinking celebrations. Empirical research shows that South African children and early teenagers report exposure to alcohol advertising, which is significantly associated with their own alcohol use

(Osuafor, Okoli, & Chibuzor, 2023). The more adolescents see drinking portrayed as glamorous, celebratory, and normative, the more likely they are to emulate those behaviours in real life, especially in milestone moments such as Pens Down. Thus, the cycle created by social observation, peer norms, and media depiction helps explain why Pens Down celebrations remain widespread and risky: they are deeply embedded in both youth identity and social reward structures.

Risk-Taking Theory and Adolescent Vulnerability

Risk-Taking Theory helps explain why adolescents are particularly susceptible to dangerous behaviour during these celebrations. From a developmental perspective, youth are more likely to engage in risk-taking due to immature executive functioning, high sensitivity to reward, and peer influence (Steinberg, 2008). Their brains are still developing, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, which governs impulse control, planning, and assessing long-term consequences. Health-E (2023) underscores this vulnerability: adolescents are more susceptible to the neurotoxic effects of alcohol, impaired decision-making, and diminished self-monitoring. When they drink, they may not fully perceive or recognize the dangerous consequences, such as overconsumption, loss of inhibition, or poor coordination. These neurocognitive vulnerabilities mean they can engage in harmful behaviours more easily than adults, especially in celebratory and emotionally heightened contexts such as Pens Down. Risk-taking is further magnified by psychosocial motivations. The findings showed that young people drink to relieve academic stress, boost self-esteem, and achieve social reward (Lategan et al., 2024). These motivations are amplified during key transitional moments: finishing exams is emotionally powerful, representing both release and uncertainty. When under pressure, young people may turn to alcohol not just as a coping mechanism, but as a socially sanctioned way to mark achievement. Combined with their neurobiological immaturity, this drive heightens the potential for risky choices. More importantly, risk-taking behaviour in adolescence tends to cluster. Engagement in one high-risk behaviour (e.g., heavy drinking) often co-occurs with others (e.g., unprotected sex, substance experimentation, transport risk). The celebratory context of Pens Down provides a catalyst for such clustering, as youth gather, consume alcohol, and push boundaries in a collective setting. The risk-taking moment, then, is not isolated — it is amplified, normalized, and socially rewarded.

The Enyobeni Disaster as a Stark Illustration

The Pens Down phenomenon, while widely celebrated as a cultural milestone among South African youth, carries latent risks that can manifest in tragic outcomes. Nowhere is this more starkly illustrated than in the Enyobeni Tavern disaster of June 2022. During a gathering attended primarily by adolescents, 21 young people lost their lives under circumstances linked to overcrowding, inadequate safety protocols, and alcohol consumption (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). The incident has since been widely discussed in both public health and media circles as an emblematic example of the dangers inherent in unregulated celebratory environments, particularly when alcohol, peer dynamics, and commercial interests intersect. The disaster underscores multiple structural weaknesses in the regulation of youth spaces and alcohol sales. Reports following the incident highlighted that underage patrons were able to access the tavern, indicating lapses in compliance with legal age restrictions and licensing conditions (Eastern Cape Liquor Board, 2024). This aligns with research showing that adolescents in South Africa frequently encounter environments in which alcohol availability is high and oversight is minimal, particularly in peri-urban and township contexts (Mmereki, Mathibe, Cele, & Modjadji, 2022; Osuafor, Okoli, & Chibuzor, 2023). Studies have demonstrated that high alcohol outlet density, weak enforcement, and commercial pressures to host large-scale events amplify risks for young participants, particularly during periods of culturally sanctioned celebration such as exam season (Lategan, du Preez, & Pentz, 2024). Beyond regulatory failures, the Enyobeni tragedy reflects broader sociocultural dimensions of risk. Pens Down celebrations are ritualised practices, marking the transition from academic pressure to social freedom, and are deeply embedded in youth culture (Lifestyle & Tech, 2025). Adolescents participating in these events are influenced by peers, older youth, and local social norms that normalise high-risk behaviours, including excessive alcohol consumption. Social Learning Theory explains this phenomenon, suggesting that young people observe, imitate, and internalise behaviours that are modelled by peers and sanctioned by cultural expectation (Bandura, 1977; Ivani et al., 2023). In this context, the Enyobeni disaster was not a spontaneous aberration but the extreme endpoint of a systemically reinforced risk culture, where hazardous behaviour is ritualised and symbolically rewarded. The event also underscores the limitations of moralistic or punitive approaches to youth alcohol consumption. While public discourse often frames such tragedies in terms of individual irresponsibility, research indicates that structural factors, such as venue safety standards, regulatory compliance, and access to harm reduction messaging, play a decisive

role in outcomes (Health Systems Trust, 2023; World Health Organization, 2024). The Enyobeni case illustrates that adolescents are situated within complex environments where agency is shaped by both social pressures and systemic shortcomings, highlighting the importance of multifaceted interventions. Finally, the disaster has catalysed discussions about youth-centred harm reduction strategies. Initiatives such as AWARE.org's Pens Down campaigns seek to reframe celebration by engaging adolescents directly, promoting alcohol-free alternatives, and fostering community accountability (AWARE.org, 2024). The Enyobeni incident serves as a cautionary exemplar of why such approaches are urgent: reducing mortality and morbidity requires both regulatory enforcement and proactive cultural engagement that respects youth autonomy while mitigating risk. In summary, the Enyobeni Tavern disaster stands as a stark illustration of the extreme consequences associated with Pens Down celebrations. It highlights regulatory weaknesses, structural inequalities, and sociocultural dynamics that collectively heighten risk. Importantly, it demonstrates that interventions must extend beyond moral condemnation to include systemic reforms, targeted harm reduction, and youth-engaged strategies capable of reshaping celebration culture safely.

Structural Barriers and Regulatory Gaps

While community-level interventions are emerging, the broader regulatory environment remains fragile. The Government Gazette in 2023 identified serious challenges in enforcing age restrictions, liquor licensing, and outlet density control (Government Gazette, 2023). High density of liquor outlets near schools and in low-income communities continues to undermine underage drinking prevention efforts, despite official regulations designed to limit youth access. Moreover, enforcement is uneven. The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) report (2022) describes how some liquor outlet owners prefer to pay fines rather than comply with regulations; fines are cheaper than forgoing profit, making age verification sporadic at best (HSRC, 2022). This weak enforcement environment effectively normalizes underage access and reduces the deterrent value of regulations. Another significant barrier is the fragmentation of policy and practice. Although regulators like provincial liquor boards (e.g., Eastern Cape Liquor Board) have initiated anti-Pens Down education campaigns, their reach is limited, and such efforts are not yet integrated into national youth alcohol strategy. Community-level awareness raising is often ad hoc and reactive, focused around exam periods but lacking sustained investment and structural support. Furthermore, social enforcement gaps persist: community policing forums, schools, and local government rarely coordinate proactively to anticipate and mitigate high-risk celebrations. Without coordinated

systems of accountability, regulation, and social mobilization, the ritual of Pens Down continues to function in a permissive or even complicit cultural space.

Evidence of Promising Youth-Led Interventions

Amid the risks, the discussion must also highlight areas of hope. Youth-led and peer-driven interventions are beginning to reframe how celebration is understood. **AWARE.org** is a prime example. Their **#NoToUnder18** pillar explicitly targets underage drinking through a “whole-of-society” harm-reduction approach (AWARE.org, 2023). According to the organisation, their campaigns have increased awareness among youth, encouraged abstinence, and promoted peer-based leadership. Their blog reports that in the first half of 2024, participants demonstrated a 59% rise in knowledge about the dangers of underage drinking, and 71% committed to reducing consumption or abstaining entirely (AWARE.org, 2024). These results show that targeted, research-informed, positive messaging can shift attitudes and intentions among young people. Furthermore, in 2025 AWARE.org expanded its peer-to-peer programming through a partnership with the Eastern Cape Liquor Board and community organisations (AWARE.org, 2025). The programme trains student leaders to run workshops on brain development, long-term goals, resilience, and safe celebration. Rather than lecturing, the initiative encourages youth to own the narrative: to define what “celebration” means for them and their peers in safer, more dignified ways (AWARE.org, 2025). These peer-led interventions exemplify a crucial shift: away from fear-based campaigns toward empowerment-based models. Rather than framing youth as problems to be fixed, these initiatives treat them as agents who can redefine their own rituals and norms. Social Learning Theory supports this approach: when positive models are internalised, behaviour change is more likely to stick.

Integrating Policy, Practice, and Research: A Holistic Response

The findings in this review suggest that addressing Pens Down risks effectively requires a multi-level, integrated response. First, policy integration is necessary. Liquor regulation must explicitly account for youth celebratory rituals. Provincial liquor boards and national authorities should collaborate to develop licensing protocols, venue safety standards, and youth-protection measures that anticipate seasonal peaks (such as exam periods). This could include mandatory age checks, occupancy limits, and youth liaison officers at licensed venues. Second, sustainable youth-led prevention must be scaled. Programs like AWARE.org’s peer-to-peer model should be expanded geographically and adapted to local

contexts. Schools, community centres, and youth organisations should be resourced to co-design alcohol-free celebration alternatives, music events, cultural gatherings, sports tournaments, that resonate with young people's aspirations and cultural values. Third, community engagement is critical. Parents, educators, tavern owners, community police forums, and older youth must be mobilised in a coordinated fashion. Local campaigns can combine awareness raising with practical support: working with tavern owners to enforce age restrictions, helping parents to set celebration plans, and building community spaces for safe gathering. Fourth, research must catch up. As indicated in the results, there is a lack of academic work that explicitly examines Pens Down as a ritual practice, its prevalence, and its long-term outcomes. Longitudinal studies, ethnographic research, and mixed-methods approaches could shed light on trajectories of risk, protective factors, and cultural variation. Research should also evaluate the impact of youth-led interventions, measuring not just short-term knowledge shifts, but sustained behavioural change across exam cycles. Fifth, gender-sensitive strategies are essential. Given the links between youth drinking, gender-based violence, and power dynamics, interventions must address power, masculinity, consent, and relational health. Initiatives should include educational components about healthy relationships, how alcohol impacts behaviour, and accountability for violence. Peer-led dialogues and community forums can help challenge gender norms and foster safer, inclusive celebration practices. Finally, evaluation and accountability should be built into interventions. Regulators and community actors must monitor the impact of policies, track youth alcohol outcomes across exam seasons, and hold venues accountable. Data collection should be routine, transparent, and youth-informed.

Ethical Considerations and the Moral Framing of Youth Risk

The discussion also raises important ethical and normative questions. It is tempting for policymakers and the public to condemn youth celebrations like Pens Down as irresponsible or reckless. Yet, a more nuanced framing acknowledges that young people are navigating legitimate desires for identity, belonging, and release. Demonising youth may backfire: heavy-handed moralising risks alienating the very individuals who must be engaged in harm-reduction efforts. Social Learning Theory reminds us that behaviour change is most sustainable when it comes from within social networks. Interventions that stigmatise or penalise may push young people further underground, making celebrations more clandestine and dangerous. Instead, ethically and pragmatically, efforts should empower youth to define what safe celebration looks like, and to lead in shaping norms. There is also a justice

dimension: many of the structural risk factors (e.g., outlet density near schools, regulatory noncompliance, weak enforcement) disproportionately affect low-income communities. Addressing Pens Down risk culture is not only a public health challenge, but one of social equity. Youth in under-resourced communities may have fewer alternative spaces for celebration, making taverns or informal gatherings the default. Interventions must prioritize these communities and ensure that harm-reduction resources are equitably distributed.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the analysis presented here is grounded in the best available public data and peer-reviewed research, there are limitations to the conclusions. First, because Pens Down is under-researched in academic literature, much of the understanding comes from policy documents, advocacy reports, and media coverage. These sources are valuable but may lack the methodological rigor or representativeness of academic studies. Second, the causal pathways between celebration rituals, alcohol access, and harmful outcomes remain incompletely mapped. There is a risk of over-attributing incidents like Enyobeni solely to the culture of Pens Down without considering broader socio-economic, infrastructural, or systemic failures. To address these limitations, future research should adopt longitudinal cohort designs to track youth behaviour through academic transitions, examining how participation in Pens Down correlates with subsequent health, social, and legal harms. Ethnographic and qualitative methods should explore how different communities interpret and ritualise exam celebrations, including variations across urban/rural contexts, socioeconomic strata, and cultural groups. Additionally, intervention research should include process evaluations of youth-led campaigns, assessing not only immediate changes in awareness or intention, but long-term behavioural shifts, community engagement, and policy influence. Mixed-methods designs combining quantitative surveys, interviews, and participatory workshops would provide rich data to guide scalable strategies.

Implications for Theory

From a theoretical standpoint, this discussion underscores the utility of combining Social Learning Theory with Risk-Taking Theory in understanding youth alcohol practices. Pens Down serves as a clear case where observational learning (from peers, media, older youth) converges with developmental propensities toward risk-taking. However, extending theory further may require integrating cultural ritual theory: conceptualising Pens Down not just as risky behaviour, but as a emerging *rite of passage* deeply anchored in collective youth

identity. Ritual theory, drawn from anthropology and sociology, can enrich our understanding by framing Pens Down as a symbolic system: a culturally sanctioned, temporally bounded moment that transitions young people from one phase of life to another. This ritual framing helps explain why conventional harm-reduction messages sometimes miss the mark: they may fail to resonate because they do not acknowledge the meaning and agency young people attach to these celebrations.

CONCLUSION OF DISCUSSION

In sum, the Pens Down phenomenon reveals how youth culture, developmental psychology, and structural inequities intersect to produce a high-risk celebratory ritual. The findings demand a shift from adversarial or punitive responses to youth drinking toward more inclusive, youth-led, and structurally informed harm-reduction strategies. By applying Social Learning Theory, Risk-Taking Theory, and ritual theory, stakeholders can better understand how to engage young people in co-creating safe celebrations that honour their identities and developmental needs. Addressing the structural barriers, especially regulatory gaps, unequal access to safe spaces, and gendered power dynamics, is imperative. Equally crucial is institutionalising youth voice in policy and program design, so that interventions reflect lived experience rather than top-down moralising. Finally, the dearth of empirical research on Pens Down requires urgent redress: rigorously evaluating both the risks and the responses across contexts is essential to guiding future policy and practice. If South Africa is to protect its youth from the potential harms of celebratory risk culture without stifling their right to joy and community, it must invest in holistic, youth-empowering, evidence-based, and equity-conscious solutions. The potential is not only to reduce harm, but to transform how young people mark life transitions with dignity, responsibility, and collective meaning.

Recommendations

Addressing the risks associated with Pens Down celebrations requires coordinated, multi-level action. The following recommendations are grouped into five strategic areas, each with operational measures, responsible actors, and monitoring indicators. The approach foregrounds youth agency, gender sensitivity, equity, and the need to combine regulation with positive alternatives.

Scale youth-led prevention campaigns and peer mobilisation

Rationale: Evidence shows that youth respond most to messages framed and delivered by peers and that empowerment-based approaches shift attitudes more reliably than fear-based campaigns (AWARE.org media; UNICEF South Africa, 2024). Peer modelling also leverages Social Learning Theory: positive behaviours are adopted when peers enact and normalise them.

Operational measures

- Expand and fund peer-led campaigns such as AWARE.org’s “Celebrate. Pause. Dream.” program to operate at scale across provinces, with specific outreach in rural, peri-urban and township communities. Peer ambassadors should be recruited from schools and tertiary institutions and trained in facilitation, substance-use harm reduction, and referral pathways. AWARE.org has piloted such campaigns and reports measurable increases in awareness and commitment among learners. (AWARE.org, 2023; AWARE.org media, 2024–2025).
- Develop a school accreditation programme for “Safe Celebration” ambassadors. Schools that meet standards for alcohol-free Pens Down activities would receive certification and small grants to run culturally relevant events (music, art, sport). UNICEF recommends investing in youth programmes that are locally relevant and co-designed with adolescents (UNICEF South Africa, 2024).
- Integrate digital, social media, and offline strategies. Youth-focused content — videos, short films, and peer testimonials, should be co-created with young people and disseminated across platforms they use. Counter-advertising, which reframes celebration away from alcohol, can be effective if it uses peer voices and positive imagery rather than punitive messaging (Osuafor, Okoli, & Chibuzor, 2023).

Responsible actors

National and provincial Departments of Basic Education; Departments of Health; civil society (AWARE.org and partners); school governing bodies; student unions.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Short term: pre/post surveys of knowledge, attitudes and intended behaviours among participating youth.
- Medium term: monitoring of participation rates in alcohol-free Pens Down events and self-reported drinking behaviours during exam season.

- Indicators: % of schools with trained peer ambassadors; % reduction in self-reported binge drinking during exam season in intervention schools.

Budget considerations

- Allocate ring-fenced funding through provincial departments and donor partnerships for curriculum development, peer training, and small grants to schools and youth organisations. Costing should account for training, stipends for peer leaders, and multimedia production.

Equity and gender lens

- Ensure female, non-binary and marginalised youth are actively recruited as ambassadors. Programming must include content on consent, gender-based violence prevention and healthy relationships, given the documented links between adolescent drinking and GBV (HSRC, 2024).

Strengthen regulation and enforcement near schools

Rationale: Structural access to alcohol is a strong predictor of youth drinking. The Government Gazette (2023) identifies outlet density, poor licensing enforcement, and trading-hour controls as key regulatory gaps that enable underage access. Addressing the supply side is essential to reducing opportunities for risky Pens Down drinking.

Operational measures

- Map liquor outlet density near schools. Municipalities should produce geospatial maps of licensed and unlicensed outlets within a defined radius (e.g., 500–1,000 metres) of primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. This enables targeted regulatory action and informed licensing decisions.
- Enforce strict age-verification requirements and penalties. Licensing authorities must implement random compliance checks during high-risk periods (exam season) and ensure that license conditions include age-verification devices and staff training on underage sales. The Government Gazette recommends enforcement around heavy episodic drinking and related harms (Government Gazette, 2023).
- Limit new licenses near schools and community youth centres. Municipal licensing boards should adopt buffer-zone policies that restrict granting new liquor licenses within a specified distance of schools. Where existing density is high, consider moratoria or conversion incentives that offer financial or planning support to outlet owners who diversify away from alcohol sales.
- Improve venue safety standards. Licensed venues that host post-exam events must demonstrate compliance with occupancy limits, emergency exits, ventilation, and event-

management plans that include age checks and on-site first aid. This addresses risks exposed by the Enyobeni tragedy where venue safety standards were a central concern (investigations and policy responses following the incident highlighted regulatory lapses).

Responsible actors

Municipalities; provincial liquor boards (e.g., Eastern Cape Liquor Board); National Department of Trade and Industry; South African Police Service.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Establish an audit mechanism tracking compliance checks near schools annually.
- Indicator examples: number of compliance inspections during exam periods; number of violations and sanctions issued; percentage change in underage purchase rates from mystery-shop audits.

Budget considerations

- Allocate funding to municipal licensing inspectors and compliance units; consider mobile inspection teams for seasonal peaks. Explore public-private partnerships to subsidise digital age-verification tools for small outlets.

Equity and unintended consequences

- Regulation should be enacted with awareness of livelihoods. Where outlets provide local employment, introduce mitigation measures (support for alternative income generation, incentive schemes for outlet conversion). Avoid heavy-handed closures that could push celebrations into unregulated, clandestine spaces.

Promote accessible, appealing alcohol-free alternatives for celebration

Rationale: Criminalising or solely restricting youth celebrations risks driving them underground. Offering culturally resonant, alcohol-free alternatives respects youth agency and provides safe outlets for celebration. UNICEF emphasises meaningful alternatives and community spaces as protective factors for adolescents (UNICEF South Africa, 2024).

Operational measures

- Seed grants for alcohol-free Pens Down events. Education departments and municipalities should provide small competitive grants to schools and community organisations to host end-of-exam festivals focusing on music, art, sport, entrepreneurship showcases, and career orientation. Grants should require youth co-design and include safety and inclusion plans.
- Build partnerships with local arts organisations, sports clubs and higher-education institutions to co-host mixed events that attract both younger learners and older peers in

controlled environments. Universities can open campus spaces for final-year celebrations under supervision.

- Create “Graduation to Future” programming. Pair celebrations with skills and employability workshops, mentorship sessions and information on tertiary pathways to layer positive, future-oriented content onto celebrations. This leverages the celebratory moment for civic and developmental gain.
- Ensure transport and safety plans. Provide subsidised safe transport options and visible adult supervision for alcohol-free events to reduce the incentive of attending unmanaged, alcohol-serving gatherings.

Responsible actors

Departments of Basic Education; Departments of Sport, Arts and Culture; municipal community development units; universities and community organisations.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Track numbers of alcohol-free events, youth attendance, and participant satisfaction.
- Indicators: proportion of schools that host a certified alcohol-free Pens Down event; youth reports of feeling safe and valued at such events.

Budget considerations

- Grants should be modest but meaningful, covering venue costs, performers, sound, security and transport. Seek corporate social responsibility partnerships for sponsorships.

Equity and inclusivity

- Ensure events are free or low cost and culturally inclusive. Prioritise under-resourced schools and rural communities that lack safe public spaces.

4. Integrate Pens Down explicitly into national and provincial alcohol policy frameworks

Rationale: Current alcohol strategies often focus on outlet density and treatment, but many do not explicitly incorporate seasonal or ritualised high-risk events like Pens Down. Integrating Pens Down into policy provides a strategic entry point for coordinated action across education, health, and trade sectors (Government Gazette, 2023; WHO, 2024).

Operational measures

- Amend provincial and national alcohol harm-reduction plans to include specific objectives on high-risk youth celebrations (e.g., planned awareness campaigns, compliance inspections, and school-based interventions during exam periods). Reference WHO guidance on targeted interventions for youth (WHO, 2024).

- Establish intersectoral task teams for each exam season comprising health, education, licensing authorities, municipal safety and youth representatives to plan and coordinate action. These teams should map hotspots, mobilise peer campaigns, and deploy inspection resources.
- Integrate Pens Down metrics into routine monitoring of alcohol harm (e.g., emergency department visits during exam season, underage alcohol purchase attempts, GBV incidents linked to exam celebrations). This will generate an evidence base for policy refinement.

Responsible actors

National Department of Health; Department of Basic Education; provincial liquor boards; National Disaster Management Centre.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Include Pens Down indicators in the national alcohol surveillance dashboard. Measure seasonal trends and policy impacts across years.

Budget considerations

- Minimal incremental costs if integrated into existing monitoring systems. May require budget for targeted inspections and data analysis.

Fund longitudinal and mixed-methods research on Pens Down practices and impacts

Rationale: As shown in the literature review, Pens Down is under-studied as a distinct phenomenon. High-quality longitudinal and mixed-methods research is required to understand trajectories, causal pathways and what interventions work.

Operational measures

- Commission cohort studies that follow learners from late high school through the first two post-school years to document participation in Pens Down events, patterns of alcohol use, mental health outcomes, GBV exposure, and educational and labour outcomes. Longitudinal designs allow causal inference and detection of longer-term harms.
- Support community-based participatory research and ethnographies to capture the cultural meanings of Pens Down across diverse contexts. This helps design interventions that are culturally resonant.
- Fund implementation research that evaluates peer-led campaigns, regulatory changes, and alcohol-free event grants using experimental or quasi-experimental designs where possible. Cost-effectiveness analyses are particularly important for scaling successful interventions.

Responsible actors

National Research Foundation; Departments of Health and Education; universities; donor agencies.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Require funded projects to publish open-access reports and share de-identified datasets for cross-analysis. Encourage multi-disciplinary teams including public health, sociology, education and youth studies.

Budget considerations

- Longitudinal studies are resource-intensive. Seek blended funding from government research grants, international donors and public-private partnerships. Allocate funds also for translation of research into policy briefs and implementation toolkits.

Ethical considerations

- Ensure research adheres to ethical standards for minors, but note that desk-based policy reviews and non-interventional observational work may be ethically feasible without primary consent in some contexts. However, for studies involving minors, obtain appropriate ethics clearance and include child protection protocols.

Strengthen community protection: policing, tavern engagement and parental mobilisation

Rationale: Community actors play a frontline role in shaping how celebrations unfold. Coordinated community strategies can reduce risk without criminalising young people.

Operational measures

- Seasonal community safety plans. Municipalities and community policing forums should develop exam-period safety plans that include: increased visible patrols near identified hotspots, liaison with tavern owners, and temporary youth safety hubs.
- Tavern owner engagement. Licensing boards should require venue owners to sign seasonal codes of conduct for exam periods, detailing age-verification, occupancy limits and emergency response protocols. Compliance should be linked to licence renewal. ECLB has run anti-Pens Down campaigns and engaged with venue operators (ECLB Annual Report, 2024).
- Parental education and support. Run parent information evenings in schools explaining risks, safe celebration planning, and how to negotiate trust and boundaries with adolescents. Parents can be encouraged to host or co-host alcohol-free celebrations or to agree with other parents on supervision plans for exam periods.

Responsible actors

Local municipalities; community policing forums; liquor boards; school governing bodies.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Track number of taverns signing seasonal codes; number of community safety plans implemented; parental participation in safety meetings.

Prioritise gender-sensitive and trauma-informed approaches

Rationale: Given strong links between alcohol and gender-based violence, interventions must address gender norms and protect vulnerable groups.

Operational measures

- Include GBV prevention components in peer curricula. Modules should address consent, bystander intervention, and healthy masculinities. Evidence from the HSRC GBV study indicates the need to address alcohol as a driver of violence (HSRC, 2024).
- Provide safe-space reporting and support services during exam periods. Schools and municipalities should ensure access to psychosocial services and clear reporting channels for sexual violence and exploitation.
- Train peer leaders in trauma-informed practice so they can recognise signs of abuse and refer peers appropriately.

Responsible actors

Departments of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities; Departments of Health; civil society GBV organisations.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Monitor GBV incidents during exam seasons and track referrals to support services. Evaluate changes in awareness and willingness to intervene among trained youth.

Implementation sequencing and governance

A realistic sequencing plan is critical:

- Immediate (0–6 months): Launch scaled peer campaign pilots in high-risk districts; produce guidance for municipal outlet mapping; deploy seasonal compliance checks for upcoming exam season.
- Short term (6–18 months): Expand school accreditation, seed grant programmes for alcohol-free events, and pilot area licensing buffer policies. Begin longitudinal research cohort enrolment.

- Medium term (18–36 months): Integrate Pens Down indicators into national alcohol policy frameworks; institutionalise youth ambassador training; evaluate pilot interventions and scale successful models.

Governance: Form a national intersectoral steering group chaired jointly by the Departments of Health and Basic Education with representation from liquor boards, youth organisations, and academic partners to coordinate planning, funding, data sharing, and evaluation.

Conclusion of Recommendations

The Pens Down phenomenon is a culturally meaningful rite of passage that, under current conditions, often exposes young people to elevated risks through alcohol use, GBV and transport harms. Effective responses require combining supply-side measures with youth-centred, positive alternatives and strong research to inform policy. The recommendations above set out a practical, evidence-based roadmap: scale peer-led campaigns, strengthen regulation near schools, provide appealing alcohol-free alternatives, integrate Pens Down into alcohol policy, fund longitudinal research, mobilise community stakeholders, and embed gender-sensitive approaches. With coordinated action, it is possible to preserve the social and developmental value of celebration while protecting young people's health, safety and futures.

CONCLUSION

The Pens Down tradition has become one of the most recognisable markers of student life in South Africa. For many learners, it signals the end of intense academic pressure and the beginning of a brief period of celebration before stepping into the next phase of life. Its attraction lies partly in its symbolism: it communicates achievement, collective relief and the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Yet this outward expression of joy carries a more complicated set of social and health implications that have grown increasingly urgent. The analysis presented in this study shows that Pens Down is not simply a harmless rite of passage. Instead, it is a practice deeply intertwined with risk-taking, peer influence, limited regulatory oversight and inadequate support structures for young people navigating high-pressure educational environments. By applying Social Learning Theory, the study demonstrates that students learn celebratory behaviours within their immediate social networks. When older peers and community norms associate celebration with alcohol or unsupervised gatherings, these behaviours become internalised long before exam season begins. Students do not approach Pens Down as isolated decision-makers. Rather, they act

within a social ecosystem that communicates what is acceptable, expected and even admirable. The modelling and reinforcement processes described by the theory help explain why certain harmful behaviours reproduce themselves year after year, despite public awareness campaigns and the highly publicised tragedies associated with risky gatherings.

Risk-Taking Theory provides a complementary lens by situating Pens Down celebrations within the developmental stage of adolescence and early adulthood. This life phase is characterised by heightened sensitivity to reward, increased social comparison and a strong desire for peer approval. Under these conditions, the combination of newly acquired independence, reduced parental monitoring, and the emotional release that follows examinations creates an ideal environment for experimentation. Young people may interpret the end of exams as a moment in which the usual rules can be temporarily suspended. This opens the door to binge drinking, unsafe venue attendance, reckless travel decisions and other forms of high-risk behaviour that can escalate quickly in crowded or poorly supervised environments. Understanding these developmental factors helps clarify why certain preventive messages do not resonate and why interventions must be tailored to the psychosocial realities of the students themselves. One of the most striking findings of this study is the mismatch between the cultural meaning of Pens Down and the structural environments in which it unfolds. While the celebration is rooted in a desire for joy, recognition and closure, many of the spaces where gatherings occur are either ill-equipped or poorly regulated. The tragedy at Enyobeni Tavern remains an especially stark reminder of what can happen when youth behaviour, inadequate security measures and weak regulatory enforcement converge. Although not every Pens Down event results in harm, the pattern of incidents across provinces suggests that risk is not incidental. It is structured by contextual factors such as outlet density near schools, uneven enforcement of age verification, the presence of unlicensed venues and limited community capacity to monitor high-risk gatherings.

Equally important are the social and emotional pressures that surround the transition from school to adulthood. For many learners, finishing matric represents more than academic completion. It marks a moment of uncertainty about employment opportunities, financial security and future prospects. In contexts where economic hardship is common, celebration may become both an escape and a coping mechanism. Alcohol use can therefore serve psychological functions beyond recreation, including temporary relief from stress, social

bonding and the affirmation of status within peer groups. Recognising these motivations is essential to designing interventions that address root causes, rather than simply condemning the behaviour. The evidence also points to promising avenues for change. Youth-led campaigns have begun to shift narratives around celebration by promoting safer, more inclusive and alcohol-free alternatives. These initiatives suggest that young people are not resistant to change; rather, they respond positively when they are included as partners in designing solutions. When students themselves articulate messages about safety, dignity and collective responsibility, these messages carry greater authenticity and social force. This insight aligns with broader findings in youth health promotion, where participatory approaches consistently outperform top-down directives.

Policy responses, however, remain uneven. While some provincial liquor boards and civil society organisations have developed programmes targeting high-risk celebratory periods, the absence of a coordinated national framework limits the impact of these efforts. The lack of systematic integration into broader alcohol harm-reduction strategies also means that Pens Down risks are often seen as seasonal issues rather than symptoms of deeper structural problems. Without sustained investment in regulatory enforcement, community mobilisation and school-based prevention, ad hoc initiatives are unlikely to generate long-term change. The study also highlights notable gaps in academic research. Although youth drinking and risk behaviour have received considerable attention, the specific dynamics of Pens Down celebrations remain underexplored. Little is known about the geographical distribution of high-risk gatherings, the role of digital media in organising events, or the long-term effects of participation on educational and health outcomes. This gap leaves policymakers without robust evidence to design targeted interventions. Future studies should employ longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches to capture the cultural, psychological and structural dimensions of the phenomenon. Such research would help clarify whether Pens Down is evolving, whether new risk factors are emerging, and how different communities adapt or resist these celebratory practices.

Another area requiring more attention is the gendered nature of risk. Although this study touches on the links between alcohol and gender-based violence, further empirical work is needed to understand the experiences of young women and gender-diverse students during Pens Down events. Reports of harassment, coercion and violence in alcohol-heavy settings suggest that risk is not distributed evenly. Effective intervention must therefore incorporate

gender-sensitive strategies, safe reporting mechanisms and targeted support for groups that may face heightened vulnerability. Overall, the findings of this study show that safer forms of celebration are both necessary and achievable. The goal is not to eliminate joy or prohibit students from marking their achievements. Rather, the task is to create environments where celebration enhances, rather than jeopardises, well-being. This requires collaboration between government, schools, communities, families and youth themselves. It requires regulatory systems that protect young people, public health strategies that address underlying causes, and educational programmes that equip students with the skills to navigate transition periods responsibly.

Ultimately, the Pens Down phenomenon raises a broader question about how a society supports young people at critical moments of change. If celebration becomes a pathway to harm, the costs extend beyond individual incidents. They affect families, communities and future educational and labour outcomes. Protecting youth futures therefore involves more than addressing the symptoms of risky celebrations. It involves nurturing environments where achievement is recognised, joy is encouraged and safety is non-negotiable. In conclusion, Pens Down remains a culturally significant practice that captures the excitement and vulnerability of youth transitions. Its current form, however, exposes young people to avoidable risks that require a coordinated and thoughtful response. By integrating theoretical insights with practical interventions, this study emphasises the need for holistic, evidence-informed strategies that centre the voices and experiences of students. As awareness grows and policy frameworks evolve, there is an opportunity to transform Pens Down into a celebration that truly honours the resilience, ambition and promise of South Africa's young people.

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