



Exploring factors triggering senior phase learners' depression in high schools

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Abstract—Depression is a major public health concern among adolescents and particularly senior phase learners in Grades 7 and 9, as it disrupts their emotional well-being, learning, and long-term potential. This desktop study examines the circumstances leading to depression among senior phase learners in Thabo Mofutsanyane District schools. Adopting a desk-based approach, the study reviews secondary publications from 2015 to 2025, with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory providing the framework. The study determines that depression is brought on primarily by four interlocking circumstances: school-based factors such as workload and bullying, home and family factors such as inadequate relationships and unsupportive parenting styles, the impact of long-term use of social media on self-esteem and sleeping habits, and socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and a lack of mental health services in rural areas. The study identifies a lack of adequate support in schools and recommends special intervention measures, including teacher training, parent involvement, anti-bullying campaigns, and improved mental health services to communities. By addressing the causes of depression, decision-makers and educationists can help reduce depression among learners and achieve healthier developmental outcomes in South African rural settings.

Keywords: Depression, High schools, Mental health, Senior phase learners

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I. INTRODUCTION

DEPRESSION is one of the leading mental health illnesses, which causes disease burden and disability in all age groups (Magklara et al., 2015). Depression causes adverse conditions like suicide, substance abuse, and consequential social and educational disabilities. Depression is more than just a typical feeling of sadness; instead, it is a mental illness that is associated with cognitive, emotional, and physical symptoms such as sadness, emptiness, hopelessness, and sleeping disorders (Paunio et al, 2015). The WHO rated depression as the third leading cause of global diseases and predicted that by 2030, it would be one of the leading causes of death and disability in the world (Malhi & Mann, 2018). This mental health can emerge at an early stage of life, such as childhood, and it can lead to the risk of substance abuse, early death, and chronic diseases (Gilman et al., 2017).

Adolescents are also a high-risk group for depression, with approximately 20% being affected (Zhang et al., 2023). Depression may also interfere with the growth of an adolescent, potentially causing future problems. Depression in children and adolescents is usually expressed through problem behaviours like risky sexual behaviour, substance use, crime, self-injury, suicide, poor adaptation to school, poor school performance, and school dropout. While in South Africa, research regarding the prevalence among adolescents is scarce, research suggests that depression is among the most prevalent disorders presented during childhood as well as adolescence (Rawatlal et al., 2015). Strydom and other scholars established that although the absence of depression was not widespread among their population, the prevalence was still significantly higher among adolescents. The province with the highest depression rate in 2013 was the Eastern Cape, at 31,4%. In their report, the nationally representative South African Stress and Health survey indicated that approximately 20% annually

suffer from depression as well as stress disorders among young people residing in South Africa (Ajaero et al., 2018).

In Greece, there has been limited research on the causes of depression in adolescents. A recent study, which investigated the symptoms of depression among adolescents in Greece attending senior high schools, reported a prevalence rate of 26.2%. High prevalence of depression among adolescents aged between 12 and 17 has been recorded in recent research conducted in Greece. Despite the high prevalence of depression among adolescents, the disabilities that come with depression, as well as the high prevalence, research has indicated limited utilisation of health services. Utilisation of health services is even less among patients who are suffering from non-comorbid depression (Lee et al., 2024). Financial issues are one of the biggest effects of depression among adolescents in Greece (Magklara et al., 2015). Depression and financial issues were strongly related, as indicated by the research. Despite all the challenges that come with depression, adolescents do not seek professional assistance.

Depression is a complex diagnostic construct used to describe individuals who display symptoms including irritability and lack of interest in daily living (Herrman et al., 2022). It is among the reasons why social support, early identification, and treatment need to be strengthened to enhance the quality of living among people who are depressed (Shumye et al., 2019). Preventive programmes have also been shown to lower depression. Community effective measures to prevent depression include programmes based in schools to improve coping behavioural patterns among children and adolescents. Indeed, factors such as anxiety, early adversities, socioeconomic status, and demography are referred to as the factors that determine the occurrence of depression (Craig et al., 2022). Therefore, this study explores the factors that trigger depression in senior phase learners in high schools.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Adolescents' depression is a universal public health issue with increased prevalence, which rose from 24% between the years 2001 and 2010 to 37% between the years 2011 and 2020 around the world. It is defined as being sad or irritable, no interest, and a range of somatic as well as vegetative symptoms. In addition, it influences people's moods, ideas, and behaviours, affecting their daily lives. Childhood adversities, loss, and unemployment contribute to adolescents' depression (Somefun et al., 2023). Globally, mental disorders account for about 13% of the burden of disease among adolescents aged 10-19 years. The academic demands reduce physical activities, and the physical, psychological, and behavioural development changes that occur in senior high school students make them more vulnerable to social and mental or psychological disorders.

Depression among senior high school learners is a paramount public health issue as it negatively impacts their academic performance and quality of life (Obeng-Okon et al., 2024). Compared to physical health, mental health is less prioritised. In 2022, the World Health Organisation (WHO) called on all stakeholders, including Mental health advocates and decision-makers, to step up and commit to considering and prioritising mental health issues. In sub-Saharan Africa, the rate of depression among adolescents ranges from 29,5% to 48,2% in Nigeria, Ethiopia, and South Africa. In contrast, studies in Asia and Turkey reported the prevalence of depression ranging from 44,2% to 74%. The availability and accessibility of quality mental health support for young people cannot keep up with the demands of mental health globally (Rocha et al., 2015). The difference between how many people need help with mental health issues and how many get that help is the mental health treatment gap, and it is a big problem for public health. Mental disorders are a major cause of disability, and only a small number of people with these disorders get treatment (WHO, 2022; Vigo et al., 2016).

According to Mohlomi (2025), the Thabo Mofutsanyane district has a high number of adolescent learners who are affected by mental health issues such as depression. Due to poor service delivery, such as water and electricity issues, these poor services impose challenges that negatively impact adolescent learners' lives, leading to depression. Moreover, there is a gap in local research concerning adolescent learners' depression, which necessitates this study based on exploring factors triggering depression among senior phase learners in the high schools.

Globally, the most common mental health issue in adolescent learners is depression (Piao et al., 2022; Vigo et al., 2016). Depression affects adolescent learners at the critical stage of their development. As a result, learners engage in high-risk behaviours and do not do well academically (Auerbach et al., 2015; Fergusson & Woodward, 2002). Therefore, the study was of great value because it addressed the underlying factors that trigger depression among senior-phase learners in high schools.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Depression, also called a depressive disorder, is a very common mental health problem. The disorder is a sickness that causes a person to feel sad or lose interest in things they usually enjoy. This can last for a day, a week, or even longer. It often begins in young adulthood (Stevanovic et al., 2011). It is considered the main reason people have disabilities around the world (Olin et al., 2012). Signs of depression include trouble focusing, feeling overly guilty or worthless, a sense of hopelessness, thoughts of suicide, not being able to sleep, changes in eating habits or weight, and feeling very tired or low on energy (WHO, 2022). According to the WHO (2022), 20% of young people around the world feel sad or depressed. Also, every year, 800,000 young people aged 15 to 29 die by suicide due to a lack of treatment associated with depression (WHO, 2022). The way young people experience depression is totally different from how adults experience it (Amaltinga & Mbinta, 2020). For instance, when adolescents experience depression, they tend

to be aggressive, irritable, and often engage in misconduct. The research aims to explore factors that cause depression in senior phase learners.

Factors triggering learners' depression

School-related factors

Academic pressure is one of the main factors that can make adolescent learners feel depressed. According to surveys conducted, stress from schoolwork is a major cause of mental health problems in adolescents (Fildes et al., 2014; Young Minds, 2019). Also, past studies show that adolescents are facing more academic pressure, which makes them more vulnerable to depression and other mental health problems (Lofstedt et al., 2020). Academic pressure refers to the stress learners experience and is perpetuated by personal, family, school, and societal expectations. High school learners face different academic challenges that vary with their level of education (Ye et al., 2025). For instance, learners in the senior phase encounter new subjects and a learning environment different from primary school. Therefore, the new encounter requires them to adapt to harsh academic demands while manoeuvring social relationships with peers, which could lead to stress and discomfort (Akhtar & Akhtar, 2024). As a result, they might feel isolated, frustrated, and eventually depressed (Latham, 2020).

Academic pressure includes test and exam schedules, after-school extra classes, and overwhelming tests and assignments (Jiang et al., 2022). Learners are overwhelmed by exams, tests, and the volume of difficult homework. Moreover, they are overwhelmed by attending after-school classes conducted for curriculum subjects (Wang et al., 2025). Consequently, learners end up developing depression due to the stress associated with academic pressure. Additionally, academic performance is associated with depression among adolescents. When adolescent learners attain poor marks, they tend to feel depressed compared to their peers who attain high marks (Jiang et al., 2021). According to the study conducted by UNICEF, an average of 66% learners experience depression due to poor grades. One review proposed that adolescents' social standing depends on their academic performance, driven by economic and educational opportunities (Yan et al., 2024). Therefore, academic stress increases the likelihood of depressive symptoms (Wang et al., 2025).

Many studies have shown that bullying in schools is linked to adolescent behaviour. Bullying is defined as intentional, repeated, and aggressive behaviour toward a person (Hen et al., 2025). School bullying is a major problem worldwide, and it has been associated with depression among adolescents. Globally, about 10-30% of adolescents are victims of bullying (Schoeler et al., 2018). Victims of school bullying often include learners with poor interpersonal skills, unappealing physical appearances, members of the LGBTQI community, and those with poor academic performance (Wang, 2019). Being bullied can lead to anxiety, social withdrawal, and negative impacts on mental health, including depression. Additionally, bullying in schools can cause students to feel very sad and may lead to other dangerous behaviours, such as non-suicidal self-injury (Jiang & Chai, 2025; Han et al., 2025).

School stress stems from internal conflicts, problems at school, issues at home, and, sometimes, societal pressures. Analysing these factors can really help create support programs for mental health in schools. Although school-based mental health programs have proven effective, they often fail because the specific causes of the issues are not clearly identified (Bonell et al., 2018; Shinder et al., 2018; Weare & Nind, 2011).

Family and home environment

Roughly 50% of adolescents suffer from depression due to unfortunate life events stemming from family and home environment (Amaltinga & Mbinta, 2020). Studies have shown a link between family dynamics and adolescents' depression (Lin et al., 2008; Şireli & Soykan, 2016). A recent study found that problems within a family can be connected to feelings of depression, and how well a family works together can help predict a person's level of depression (Guerrero-Muñoz et al., 2020). The dynamics of the family influence the child's development and the onset of depression (Şireli & Soykan, 2016). Family dynamics such as poor relationships, negligence, frequent arguments,

and a lack of emotional support cause social exclusion and emotional neglect among adolescents (Moody et al., 2019). Due to these unfortunate adversities, adolescents feel isolated and rejected, and their self-esteem diminishes; eventually, they develop depressive symptoms (Wubshet et al., 2025). In contrast, past studies show that when a family has good family dynamics, adolescents in that family are less likely to face physical and mental health problems.

Additionally, adolescents who come from a home environment with parents with negative parenting styles tend to suffer from depression (Amaltinga & Mbinta, 2020). Parenting styles refer to the ways parents enforce rules, regulations, attitudes, and behaviours to raise and educate their children (Cheng et al., 2023). Parenting styles are contributing factors to adolescents' depression (Griffith et al., 2019). Parents or guardians with negative parenting skills characterised by hostility, harshness, intrusion, and strict supervision towards their children predict the development of depression in adolescents (Liu et al., 2021; Moody et al., 2019). For instance, adolescents raised by parents with negative parenting skills show less psychological resilience and anxiety (Cheng et al., 2023). Some studies overlook how family factors affect depression, making it harder to prevent depression. Many studies show that how a family works is important for understanding how adolescents develop depression, go through it, and relapse (Şireli & Soykan, 2016).

Social media

Social media is thought to be one of the reasons for depression in adolescent learners. One reason more young people are feeling depressed is the emergence of social media (McCrae et al., 2017; Twenge et al., 2018). Social media encompasses a wide range of platforms, including text messages, emails, blogs, dating websites, games, entertainment, and social networking sites (Manning, 2014). The most popular social media platforms used by adolescents are YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Other studies have looked at how things like peer pressure from social media and reasons for using social media can lead to depression and other mental health problems. Adolescents tend to compare themselves with their peers, which can leave them feeling bad about themselves and affect their self-esteem and self-confidence (Mohlomi, 2025). As a result, the pressure on social media triggers the onset of depression. Adolescents tend to imitate their role models, leading to self-dissatisfaction and disordered eating when they cannot meet those expectations (Loneragan et al., 2019; Dane & Bhatia, 2023).

Prolonged use of social media causes sleep impairment, which impacts mental health (Royal Society for Public Health and Young Health Movement, 2017). Studies have reported that 36% of adolescents wake up at night to browse social media, and 40% do so a few minutes before they fall asleep. Social media impacts the quality of sleep among adolescents, which subsequently triggers mental health disorders in young people. Insomnia and other sleep-related factors are reported as the onset causes of a correlation between social media use and depression (Li et al., 2017; Vernon et al., 2017).

Recent studies have found that using social media is linked to depression in teenagers. However, the connection is unclear because there is little evidence (Keles et al., 2019). In contrast, other studies indicate that using social media is linked to depression (Best et al., 2014).

Socio-economic factors

Social and economic factors are the major contributing factors to adolescent learners' depressive disorder. The main socio-economic factors that are associated with adolescent learners' depression are educational achievement and the source of income within the family. Statistically, 50% of adolescents between the ages of 10 and 18 suffer from depression because of socio-economic factors, according to UNFPA (Amaltinga & Mbinta, 2020). Based on previous studies done on different countries, learners from poor countries suffer from mental health issues, mainly depression disorder. Adolescents from low socio-economic groups are more likely to develop depression compared to those from higher socio-economic groups (Wubshet et al., 2025).

Adolescents in rural areas are more vulnerable to mental health disorders due to socio-economic challenges. Rural areas are characterised by numerous socio-economic challenges, including limited opportunities, high unemployment, geographical isolation, and limited access to health care services (Hastings & Cohn, 2013; Mueller et al., 2021; Peters, 2020). Approximately 60-70% of learners suffer from depression because of severe living conditions, due to poverty in under-resourced areas.

Family income and social status contribute to adolescents' mental health (Li et al., 2020). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory states that the family has a significant impact on how a child grows and develops (Tudge & Rosa, 2019; Shek et al., 2018). As a result, a family's financial situation affects how an adolescent grows and develops. For example, a teenager from a low-income family is more likely to have mental health problems than a teenager from a wealthy family. This is because adolescents from low-income families face bad situations and stress that they cannot manage because they do not have enough support and resources (Datta et al., 2021). Therefore, due to these events, they are more likely to experience depression (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Gang & Dajun, 2018; Rivenbark et al., 2019).

South Africa is known for its history of being associated with social and economic challenges due to inequalities that resulted from racist policies (Elwell-Sutton et al., 2017). KwaZulu is one of the provinces with rural areas with severe poverty. Adolescents in Kwa-Zulu Natal face mental health problems, with many experiencing depression because they come from low-income backgrounds. According to 2022 statistics, 24.8% of children do not live with their birth parents, 29% of households struggle to have enough food, and 46.7% of people are not working, including those who are discouraged job seekers. It has been shown that social and economic factors play a role, and there is evidence to support these claims (Marra & Nielsen, 2025).

Literature gap

Although various studies have examined adolescent depression variables, including academic pressure, parental relationships, social media use, and socio-economic variables, there are still significant gaps. Most of the research conducted so far explores factors triggering depression in adolescents in a single dimension without providing a full picture of how they interact and bring about depression and impact learners' well-being (Steara et al., 2023; Yuan, 2023; Cao et al., 2021). It narrows the development of holistic in-school intervention strategies to assist students experiencing mental health issues.

Studies that specifically investigate the factors triggering depression among senior phase learners (Grades 7-9) are very limited. Many studies focus on broad adolescent groups and high school learners, and there is little consideration of this transition phase, which presents special academic, social, and developmental challenges (Ye et al., 2025; Akhtar & Akhtar, 2024). Because learners in this phase experience rising academic pressure and social demands while still transitioning from the primary environment. Therefore, more focus should be invested in this study.

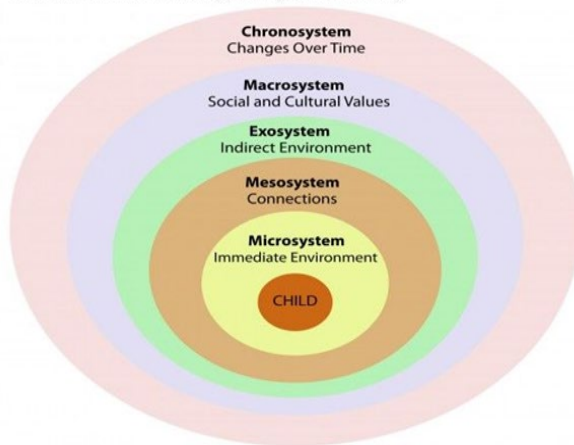
There are also a few studies conducted in South Africa, especially in rural areas like the Thabo Mofutsanyane District, concerning factors triggering adolescent learners' depression. The realities of rural learners in South Africa, who are subjected to accumulative factors like poverty, unreliable service delivery, and a lack of mental health accessibility (Mohlomi, 2025), are drastically less addressed by international and cross-border works, even though they report similar risk factors (Mkhize et al., 2024; Rossouw et al., 2024). Thus, it limits district-based findings. Hence, the current study seeks to bridge the above gaps by focusing on senior phase students in the Thabo Mofutsanyane District, investigating the factors that trigger depression, and identifying contextually relevant school-based support services that provide intervention.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The best theory for this study is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

Theory, first published in 1977. The theory holds that a person's growth is influenced by various interconnected environments, ranging from their immediate surroundings, such as family, to broader societal factors, such as culture. The theory has four parts: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and chronosystem. These parts help show how people grow and behave differently. The theory is used to examine the causes of depression among senior-phase learners in high schools. The Ecological Theory looks at how things like school, family life, social media, and other social issues can cause depression in senior phase learners.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



Microsystem

The system holds that an individual's immediate environment plays a major role in shaping their growth and behaviour. Adolescents' interaction with their family influences the development of depression. Family is an important aspect of human development, and adolescents depend on their families for support, nurturance, and assistance. Previous studies reported that low-income family functioning increases the risk of depression. The school environment also plays a crucial role in influencing depression among adolescent learners. Bullying that takes place within the school environment leads to depression, which can lead to physical injuries (Jiang & Chai, 2025; Han et al., 2025).

Mesosystem

The systems show the influence that happens when different microsystems link in an individual's life. The school environment and family factors interact, and they influence adolescents' mental health outcomes. The way parents govern their children's lives can contribute to their mental health. Some parents tend to exert pressure on their children concerning their education. For instance, they compare their children's academic performance with that of their peers. As a result, this can cause negative feelings, and it can yield depression.

Exosystem

In this system, an Individual's development and behaviour are influenced by external forces. Depression among adolescents is influenced by socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is an essential environmental factor that influences adolescents' development and behaviour (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Adolescents from families with low socioeconomic status have fewer resources, and they have limited access to health care services (Chen et al., 2016). Consequently, their chances of being at risk of developing depression become high (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Gang & Dajun, 2018; Rivenbark et al., 2019).

Macrosystem

The system entails that cultural and societal factors influence an individual's behaviour. Studies have reported that adolescents' economic and social conditions in which they live influence their physical and mental health. Adolescents' socioeconomic background determines their risk of developing depression. Many children and adolescents in the province of KwaZulu-Natal live in poverty. However, Rossouw et al. (2024) revealed that adolescents with a poor

socioeconomic background are more likely to develop depression in South Africa.

Chronosystem

The system entails the transitions that occur across different microsystems and how they change those microsystems. Adolescents in the senior phase are undergoing the critical transition from the intermediate phase, which comes with high academic pressure, and this increases the risk of depression. Adolescent learners encounter different levels of academic pressure. For instance, learners in the senior phase are in the process of understanding new subjects and a new learning environment, which requires them to adjust to stricter academic demands, and this can influence the onset of depression (Ye et al., 2025).

V. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to investigate the factors that trigger depression among senior phase learners in Thabo Mofutsanyane District schools and explores the influence of the underlying contributing factors of depression on learners' well-being.

VI. METHODS

Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a way of thinking that helps researchers plan and carry out their research. It guides how they look at their research questions. It comprises a set of beliefs, assumptions, and methods that shape how people study a particular subject. Research paradigms are important because they guide logical discoveries by shaping beliefs and rules (Park et al., 2020). The study uses the interpretivism paradigm. The interpretivism paradigm, also called constructivism or naturalism, was developed as a response to the positivism paradigm. The interpretivism approach is about understanding how people personally make sense of their experiences. The framework helps to arrange the large amount of information in the research area (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Interpretivism holds that there are many ways to see and understand the world, not just one (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). The study is based on the existing literature that reflects individuals' experiences. Therefore, the interpretivism paradigm is suitable for the study. Senior phase learners in rural areas, specifically in Thabo Mofutsanyane District schools, have different experiences of mental health issues, specifically depression, due to different factors triggering them. In conclusion, this leaves a space for different realities, not just a single reality, and different experiences.

Research approach

The research approach refers to the effective way or method used to study a research question or problem. It explains how to gather information, look at the data, and decide what it means. The study uses a qualitative research method. A qualitative approach is a research method that generates information and findings without using numbers or strict facts (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). This method usually focuses on interviews, people's views, studying cultures, and other methods.

The research will use primary sources, including articles, journals, and published books, to investigate the factors that trigger depression among senior-phase learners in Thabo Mofutsanyane district schools. Information will be collected, examined, and translated based on the existing writing to create inductions to the study.

Research design

Research design determines the nature of the study, the sub-type, the research issue, the assumptions, the independent and dependent variables, the experimental plan, as well as, where necessary, the procedure for gathering data and the plan for statistical analysis (Creswell, 2014). The desktop research design was utilised in the research. Secondary research, also known as desktop research, relies on data already gathered and documented by other researchers. Data sources include public libraries, websites, reports, surveys, journals, newspapers, magazines, books, podcasts, videos, and other sources. Therefore, data collected from the sources are used to draw informative

conclusions that benefit the study. In this research design, there is no primary data collection from interviews, observation, experiments, or surveys.

Sampling

Sampling is a procedure by which researchers select individuals to participate in a study (Fraenkel et al., 2012). This study explores the factors that trigger depression among senior-phase learners in Thabo Mofutsanyane district schools. The study is desktop-based and requires no field work. The study sample published academic sources such as articles, books, and reports that are peer-reviewed by other scholars and published from 2015 to 2025. The published articles will be accessed from Google Scholar and the University of the Free State online library service. To discover the articles related to the study. The keywords such as depression, adolescents, senior phase learners, and triggering factors of depression, academic-pressure, socio-economic factors, social media, and family-related factors were used to find articles aligning with factors triggering senior phase learners' depression.

The study uses purposive sampling. The purposive sampling technique is commonly used in research papers because it aligns with any research paradigm and helps ensure a high-quality sample is selected without bias, thereby making the study's findings reliable and trustworthy. In the existing literature, purposive sampling is predominantly found in books, which provide valuable foundational knowledge (Marra & Nielsen, 2025; Sekaran & Bougie, 2020; Sarstedt et al., 2021). To ensure that the study is not based on generalisation, purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling approach, is best suited for this study. As a result, it will contribute to high-quality results for the study, which aims to explore factors that trigger depression among senior phase learners in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district schools and, in turn, determine intervention strategies to help learners who are suffering from depression.

Table 1: Summary of reviewed articles

Authors and Year	Titles
Anderson et al. (2022).	Experiencing Bullying's impact on adolescent depression and anxiety
Cao et al. (2020)	Family Socioeconomic Status and Adolescent Depressive Symptoms: A Moderated Mediation Model
Lee J. (2018).	The contributing factors to adolescents' depression
Steara et al. (2023)	The association between academic pressure and adolescents' mental health problems
Vidal et al. (2020).	Social media use and depression in adolescents: A scoping review

Data collection

Data collection is the process of gathering information to understand people's opinions or thoughts about a research topic. Collecting data is an important step in research because the quality of the results relies on it. This reduces the chances of making mistakes during the research. So, having a good research plan is important. Therefore, a researcher needs to invest time and effort in collecting high-quality data, as insufficient or incorrect data can lead to incorrect conclusions (Kabir, 2016). The study is a desktop-based, secondary-source study. Therefore, the study uses a secondary data collection method, drawing on 15 published sources, including articles and reports, to explore factors that trigger depression among senior-phase learners in high schools. The published electronic sources were accessed via the internet, including Google Scholar and the University of the Free State's online library service.

Data analysis

The study uses the thematic data analysis technique because it is a desktop-based study that focuses on analysing qualitative data, such as journals, articles, and books, based on previous research. Thematic analysis is one of the data analysis techniques that helps analyse and understand data. It refers to a qualitative research method that helps researchers carefully organise and study complex information. It involves finding common ideas by carefully reading and re-reading written notes. Moreover, thematic analysis helps with producing results that are reliable and meaningful for the research (Nowell et al., 2011). Moreover, the study focuses on investigating recurring factors that

trigger senior phase learners' depression, such as school-related, family and home environment, social media, and socio-economic factors, which makes the thematic data analysis technique suitable for the study. Lastly, the thematic analysis technique helps the study to produce meaningful and trustworthy findings.

Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are key components of research that help ensure results are accurate and dependable (Davis, 2004). Validity and reliability are important in qualitative research because they help make the research credible, applicable to other situations, trustworthy, and consistent (Arslan, 2022). These key parts help ensure that the data gathered and analysed are accurate, reliable, and aligned with the research goals. Validity refers to how well a study measures what it is supposed to measure. On the other hand, reliability means getting the same results repeatedly when you do a research study. To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, the research findings were verified to assess their credibility and authenticity. Colepicolo (2015) offers practical recommendations for obtaining reliable information in academic research, including using bibliometric indicators, evaluating information sources, and analysing content. Moreover, this study ensures the research design aligns with the research aims, objectives, and questions, thereby ensuring the study is valid and reliable. Lastly, data procedures were standardised and consistent across all sources to minimize bias and errors in the study's findings.

Ethical considerations

In research, ethics refers to the norms and values that guide decisions about data collection and analysis, as well as the dissemination of findings. According to Bos (2020), ethics is an inquiry into what is right and wrong and what researchers are bound to do. The study is a desktop-based study that relies on secondary sources published by other researchers for its findings. Therefore, for ethical reasons, all sources used in the study were referenced and cited to credit all authors and avoid plagiarism. Lastly, all sources, including journals, articles, and books, were reviewed in accordance with the university's research ethics and copyright policies.

VII. RESULTS

The study aims to explore factors triggering senior phase learners' depression. The data collection was guided by the main question: what factors trigger senior phase learners' depression, and the sub-questions: how do school-related factors influence learners' depression, and what support systems do schools offer to learners who suffer from depression. Data collection and presentation are done using the desktop research approach. The data are collected from journal articles and reports published from 2015 to 2025, accessed via Google Scholar and the University of the Free State online library service, and mainly focus on adolescent learners' depression. In terms of data analysis, the study uses thematic analysis guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Considering the study's ethics, all sources are cited appropriately to avoid plagiarism and to ensure transparency about data limitations. The chapter is arranged as follows: data sources, thematic findings, and conclusion.

Overview of data sources

Table 2: Overview of secondary sources

Sources	Author/organisation and years	Titles
Jornal	Hammen (2018).	Risk factors for depression
Journal	Sharopaliyevna (2021).	Factors influencing the manifestation of depression
Journal	Shi et al. (2023).	A study on the correlation between family dynamics and depression in adolescents
Report	WHO (2022).	School-based mental health interventions
Journal	Mohlomi, B. (2025).	Depression in Thabo Mofutsanyane

School-related factors

Previous studies show that school-related factors are the main causes

of depression among senior phase learners. Academic pressure and bullying relate to these factors, which can trigger depression among teenagers. Adolescents face academic pressure that increases their risk of depression and other mental health problems (Lofstedt et al., 2020). Academic pressure is a microsystem factor because it is influenced by the school environment, which plays a key role in learners' development. For adolescents, academic pressure comes from personal expectations as well as pressures from family, school, and society. Senior phase learners often feel overwhelmed by academic pressure due to new subjects and learning environments (Akhtar & Akhtar, 2024). These new experiences can be stressful enough to cause feelings of depression. Additionally, academic performance is closely connected to adolescents' depression, with the study reporting that 66% of learners experienced depression due to poor academic performance (Yan et al., 2024). School bullying is a widespread issue globally, and it can lead to depression among teenagers. It also acts as a microsystem factor demonstrating the weakness of school policies and the lack of parental involvement due to socio-economic influences (Mohlomi, 2025). Worldwide, 10-30% of students experience bullying at school (Schoeler et al., 2018). Adolescents who are more vulnerable to being bullied include those with poor social skills, low academic achievement, gay and lesbian students, and those with less attractive physical appearances (Wang, 2025).

Family and home environment factors

Studies have reported the correlation between family dynamics and adolescents' depression (Şireli & Soykan, 2016). 50% of adolescents suffer from depression due to family and home-related factors (Amaltinga & Mbinta, 2020). According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the family is a microsystem that directly affects a child's development. Scholars have found that adolescents living in highly dysfunctional families where there is negligence, lack of support, and constant conflict are more likely to develop depression (Moody et al., 2019). The way parents or legal guardians enforce the rules, attitudes, and behaviours towards their children plays a role in the development of depression (Griffith et al., 2019). Adolescents from families with negative parenting, who are hostile, harsh, intrusive, and with strict rules, tend to develop depression (Xie et al., 2021; Moody et al., 2019). According to Mohlomi (2025), there is a weak interaction between parents and the school, which is considered a mesosystem within the ecological systems theory. The weak interaction proves that parents are less involved in their children's lives, which increases the likelihood of depression.

Social media use

Social media is one of the contributing factors of depression among adolescent learners (McCrae et al., 2017; Twenge et al., 2018). Social media is considered an exosystem factor because it is an external force that influences adolescents' behaviours and development in this instance. 300,000 cases of depression among adolescents emerged due to the invention of social media platforms. Common social media platforms used by adolescents include YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Social media contributes to adolescents' depression as it affects their self-confidence and self-esteem (United States Surgeon General, 2021). Due to the influence of social media, adolescents tend to compare themselves with their peers or imitate their role models, ending up developing self-dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviours (Lonergan et al., 2019; Dane & Bhatia, 2023). Approximately 36% adolescent learners have insomnia due to excessive use of social media. Sleep-related factors such as insomnia cause the correlation between social media use and depression (Vernon et al., 2017).

Socio-economic factors

Adolescent learners suffer from depression due to poor socio-economic backgrounds (Amaltinga & Mbinta, 2020). Socio-economic challenges, including limited resources, high unemployment, geographical isolation, and limited access to health care services characterise rural areas. 60-70% of adolescents in rural areas suffer from

depression due to fewer opportunities presented to them and poverty due to the unemployment rate (Hastings & Cohn, 2013; Mueller et al., 2021; Peters, 2020). In addition, adolescents from families with poor socio-economic status are more likely to develop depression. Mainly, because they do not get enough financial support and resources to maintain their mental health, and this limits their access to mental health care (Datta et al., 2021).

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Secondary data sources focusing on factors that trigger senior phase learners' depression in Thabo Mofutsanyane district schools are very limited, which makes the study challenging. In addition, studies focusing on triggers of depression among senior phase learners in South Africa are very limited. Many of the data sources reviewed in the study focus on the broader context of Sub-Saharan countries and other countries outside Africa, limiting the findings to the Thabo Mofutsanyane District. The study is a desktop study that relies on peer-reviewed data sources, which prevented the collection of primary data. Learners, teachers, and local stakeholders could not share their experiences of factors that trigger depression, which limits the findings in the Thabo Mofutsanyane context. However, the above-mentioned limitations do not invalidate the study; it necessitates future research to address challenges faced by the Thabo Mofutsanyane district and the specific gaps identified through the primary data collection.

School-based interventions and support systems should be prioritised. Teachers must be offered professional development workshops and be trained to be able to perceive learners who are suffering from depression and other mental health-related issues and address these challenges. The Department of Education should prioritise the anti-bullying campaigns at rural schools to reduce bullying among adolescent learners. Schools should prioritise parent-teacher meetings to ensure parents are aware of their children's mental well-being. Moreover, digital literacy programs should be integrated into the school's curriculum to educate learners about managing online interactions. Policymakers should prioritise mental health campaigns within rural communities to reduce the stigma associated with mental health. Parents and legal guardians should be taught about mental health, on how to manage and support their children with depressive disorder symptoms. Lastly, policymakers should collaborate with other stakeholders, such as municipal leaders, community counsellors, and other government agencies, to improve service delivery and mitigate socio-economic barriers within the community.

IX. CONCLUSION

The peer-reviewed literature reviewed in this study revealed that academic pressure, bullying, family dynamics, social media use, and socio-economic challenges trigger senior phase learners' depression in Thabo Mofutsanyane District schools. Moreover, the school-based support services aimed at supporting learners who are suffering from depression are not sufficient in rural settings. The study further highlights how school-related factors, family and home environments, social media, and socio-economic factors interact across the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, according to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, providing insight into adolescents' mental health in a rural context, specifically in South Africa. The findings of the study reveal the need to address factors that trigger depression among adolescents in rural areas and the lack of support services. Addressing these issues can contribute to transformations in educational practice and policy. In the future, studies that rely on primary data collection and intervention evaluation, focusing on factors that trigger senior phase learners' depression in Thabo Mofutsanyane District Schools, should be prioritized, as there are few studies on this issue. Consequently, this ensures that senior phase learners receive the necessary support regarding their mental health to thrive.

Academic pressure is one of the common triggering factors of

adolescents' depression in rural areas. Academic pressure in rural areas stems from limited resources. Senior phase learners are overwhelmed by encountering new subjects and a new learning environment as they transition from primary school to high school. Bullying within the school is also one of the triggering factors of adolescents' depression. 10-30% of adolescents experience bullying within the school environment, which impacts their mental health, leading to depression. Due to bullying, some learners end up dropping out of school.

There is a reported correlation between family dynamics and depression among adolescent learners. Adolescents from families with broken family structures are more vulnerable to developing depressive symptoms. Parenting styles play a major role in the development of depression. Parents with negative parenting styles, such as having strict supervision and hostile behaviour, trigger the onset of depression among adolescents. Social media is considered a factor that triggers adolescents' depression. Many cases of depression among adolescents were reported when social media became popular. Social media affects adolescents' self-esteem and self-confidence, which influences their depression. The prolonged use of social media causes sleep deprivation, leading to depression. Adolescents from poor socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to develop depression. Adolescents in rural areas suffer from depression due to a lack of resources, geographic isolation, high unemployment rates, and limited access to mental health care services. The family's socio-economic status puts adolescents at risk of developing depression. Adolescents coming from poor socio-economic families do not receive enough financial support and resources to maintain mental health.

X. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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