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International Review of Social Sciences Research
Volume 5 Issue 4 December 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.53378/irssr.353271

The role of the church in fighting moral decay in Eswatini communities

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Abstract

In the recent past, the church played a central role in society, with pastors being widely respected and consulted by schools, governments, and communities during times of crisis. However, there has been a noticeable decline in the church's influence and societal trust today. This study explores the continuing potential of the church in fostering moral regeneration within communities. Its objectives include examining the extent of moral decay, identifying factors contributing to family disintegration, and assessing which societal and church values that once upheld strong family structures have been lost. A qualitative approach was adopted to provide in-depth insights into participants' experiences and interactions. The research focused on how the church can address moral decline, targeting church leaders, congregants, and community members. Data were collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews involving 24 participants, including two focus groups (youth and ordinary Christians) and eight individual interviews. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Findings indicate that moral decay has significant consequences, leading to social disengagement and the justification of unethical behavior. Despite this, the study concludes that the church still holds the potential to counteract moral decline. By implementing a comprehensive and multifaceted strategy, including education, community engagement, and the promotion of personal responsibility, the church can play a pivotal role in restoring moral standards and strengthening societal values.

Keywords: *moral decay, decadence, moral fibre, moral values, disorientation*

Article History:

***Received**: June 30, 2025*
***Revised**: August 1, 2025*
***Accepted**: August 28, 2025*
***Published online**: October 25, 2025*

Suggested Citation:
Mdluli, B.S. & Mpofu, P. (2025). The role of the church in fighting moral decay in Eswatini communities. *International Review of Social Sciences Research*, 5(4), 22-42. https://doi.org/10.53378/irssr.353271

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1. Introduction

In contemporary society, the phenomenon of moral decay manifested through rising corruption, gender-based violence, substance abuse, and the erosion of communal values has become a pressing concern across global and local contexts. Particularly in urbanized and postcolonial African settings, the church remains a pivotal institution with both spiritual and sociocultural influence. As Sekhaulelo (2021) observes, South African urban communities are experiencing a profound ethical crisis, marked by disintegration of family structures and civic accountability. This moral degeneration calls for renewed engagement from institutions historically tasked with moral stewardship.

Theologically, the church is grounded in its prophetic mandate to uphold justice, compassion, and righteousness (cf. Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:13–16). Yet, its effectiveness in fulfilling this role is increasingly challenged by sociocultural pluralism, youth disengagement, and internal fragmentation. Baloyi (2024) critiques the erosion of pastoral credibility, arguing that moral leadership must be reclaimed through exemplary conduct and contextual relevance. Similarly, Matsane (2020) emphasizes the need for churches to transcend doctrinal insularity and engage in moral regeneration through inclusive dialogue and community-based praxis.

Moral decadence in Eswatini has become a growing concern, with behaviors once deemed virtuous and commendable now increasingly devalued or ignored. Gogo (2020), in his study on the contribution of education to moral decay in Kenya, defines morality as a set of personal or cultural codes of conduct and social values that play an important role in both individual lives and the broader society. He further identifies indicators of moral decay as including increased crime and violence, corruption, the breakdown of family structures, loss of integrity, substance abuse, and a general disrespect for authority. These symptoms are evident in Eswatini, where incidents such as child abuse, embezzlement of public funds, theft, and murder have become alarmingly common. According to ENACT (2023), organized crime and the influence of state-embedded actors significantly undermine the country's governance systems. This is further supported by findings from Dlamini (2024), whose report revealed that a majority of Emaswati believe corruption is intensifying and express strong dissatisfaction with the government's anti-corruption efforts. Even more troubling is the emerging societal pattern of glorifying individuals involved in corrupt activities particularly those who defraud the government by elevating them to positions of influence or admiration.

This moral decline is not isolated to Eswatini. Mastroianni and Gilbert (2023) note that anecdotal evidence indicates that people believe that morality is declining. From both archival and original data (n = 12,492,983), the study showed that people in at least 60 nations around the world believe that morality is declining, that they have believed this for at least 70 years and that they attribute this decline both to the decreasing morality of individuals as they age and to the decreasing morality of successive generations. Thus, while Eswatini faces specific moral challenges, they mirror a broader, global perception of deteriorating ethical standards.

Equally, moral decay is manifested in the erosion of social trust, cultural degradation, decline in civic engagement, educational challenges, and health issues. Addressing moral decay often involves a multifaceted approach, including education, community, engagement, and the promotion of ethical values by influential institutions, such as the church, schools, and governments. It requires collective efforts to rebuild and reinforce the moral fabric of society. According to Mawikere et al. (2024), the church, alongside other religious institutions, assumes a crucial role in shaping societal values, including spiritual beliefs and principles. They further stated that the church actively participates in shaping society's perceptions of what holds value and who or what constitutes the focal point of their ministry. Schuhmann and Damen (2018) further affirms this notion by arguing that pastors in a secular context represented the good in the community. It is for that reason that the church is still considered a beacon of hope in matters of instilling morals.

The breakdown of families is an escalating societal concern that continues to generate a cascade of negative consequences for individuals and communities alike. The increasing prevalence of divorce and the growing number of children raised without one or both parents have become not only alarming but also a normalized trend in many societies, including Eswatini. According to the Times of Swaziland (11 September 2024), 270 marriages ended within a six-month period, as reported in the second quarter by the Ministry of Home Affairs. This statistic underscores the fragility of family structures and the urgent need to address the underlying causes of familial disintegration.

Children growing up in fragmented households often lack consistent parental guidance and emotional support, which can contribute to behavioral issues and emotional instability. As noted by Gruning et al. (2024), children from single-parent or stepfamilies are significantly more likely to experience mental health challenges, including emotional symptoms, conduct problems, and peer relationship difficulties. These psychological stressors can manifest in

broader societal issues, such as increased aggression and antisocial behavior, which in turn contribute to a more volatile and angry society. This is particularly evident in the rise of gender-based violence, a phenomenon that has been increasingly associated with unresolved childhood trauma and the absence of stable parental figures. For instance, Rosell-Bellot et al. (2025) highlight that adolescents exposed to vicarious gender-based violence and early parental separation often exhibit symptoms of complex trauma, including emotional dysregulation and aggressive behavior, underscoring the long-term societal impact of disrupted family environments.

The consequences of family breakdown extend beyond the psychological realm, encompassing economic hardship, social instability, and diminished educational outcomes. Children from disrupted families often face reduced access to resources, lower academic achievement, and limited social mobility (Mackay, 2020). These outcomes not only affect individual life trajectories but also strain public systems and hinder national development. Compounding this issue is the observable rise in moral degradation within Eswatini society, despite the longstanding presence and influence of religious institutions. Traditionally, the church has played a pivotal role in shaping moral values and guiding ethical behavior. However, the persistence of moral decay raises critical questions about the effectiveness of religious organizations in addressing contemporary moral dilemmas. Sekhaulelo (2021) argues that moral degeneration in urban communities is marked by a decline in communal responsibility, increased violence, and a weakening of social accountability trends that mirror the concerns voiced by many Eswatini citizens. Moreover, Baloyi (2024) emphasizes that the church's moral authority is undermined when its leaders fail to model the values they preach. For the church to reclaim its role as a moral compass, it must engage in introspection and renew its commitment to ethical leadership and community engagement. This includes developing targeted interventions that address the root causes of moral decay, such as poverty, inequality, and lack of education, while also fostering inclusive dialogue and collaboration with other societal stakeholders.

In light of these challenges, this paper seeks to explore the multifaceted causes of moral decline, evaluate the current efforts of religious institutions in mitigating these issues, and propose strategic approaches for enhancing the church's role in cultivating a morally resilient society. By integrating empirical data, participant perspectives, and scholarly insights, the

study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between family dynamics, moral values, and institutional responsibility in shaping the social fabric of Eswatini.

2. Theoretical Framework

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT), developed by Festinger (1957), underpins the idea that the church can foster moral development by encouraging individuals to align their actions with their values. This study builds on existing literature to explore causes of moral decay and propose solutions. Alvi et al. (2022) identify key drivers such as inadequate religious education, economic inequality, materialism, and weak legal and curricular frameworks.

Karstedt (2021) highlights global inequality as a major contributor to crime and moral decline, with marginalized groups disproportionately affected. Baloyi (2024) emphasizes the church's responsibility particularly pastors as ethical role models in addressing societal issues like corruption and violence. Ayalew and Andualem (2023) show that traditional institutions, including family and church, are vital for social cohesion and emotional stability in vulnerable populations.

In South Africa, Baloyi (2024) and Mkhize (2024) critique the church's limited response to governance and ethical crises, calling for more active engagement. Stuvland (2025) notes that globalization and postmodernism challenge but also expand the church's role in a pluralistic society. Despite efforts by groups like the Diakonia Council of Churches, research on the effectiveness of church-led moral renewal remains limited. There is a need for comparative studies across denominations and deeper integration of cultural values into church teachings.

This study also employs Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2015), which underscores the importance of social networks, shared norms, and trust in enabling individuals and communities to act collectively for mutual benefit. Within the context of Eswatini, the church serves as a vital institution in fostering social capital by promoting moral values, offering communal support, and encouraging prosocial behavior. Through its teachings, community programs, and leadership, the church has the potential to strengthen social ties and reinforce moral conduct. As society experiences a decline in moral values, the weakening of social capital manifested through diminished trust, community fragmentation, and erosion of shared norms become increasingly apparent. Reinforcing the church's role may contribute to the restoration of social capital and help counteract moral decay. Social Capital Theory thus

provides a valuable framework for evaluating the church's broader societal influence, extending beyond spiritual guidance to its impact on community cohesion and ethical behavior.

3. Methodology

3.1. Paradigm

In the face of rising moral challenges ranging from corruption and substance abuse to family breakdown and youth disillusionment the church is increasingly called to move beyond doctrinal proclamation into active societal engagement. This shift is captured by the paradigm of communal praxis within contextual theology, which frames theology not as abstract theory but as lived, responsive action rooted in the realities of specific communities. Communal praxis within contextual theology emphasizes theology as lived action, where faith communities respond to moral and social challenges through collective engagement. In postcolonial African contexts, this paradigm is especially vital, as it integrates theological reflection with cultural ethics like Ubuntu, promoting empathy, justice, and communal responsibility.

The church, through communal praxis, becomes a prophetic agent, not merely preaching morality but embodying it through education, advocacy, and social transformation. This approach challenges moral decay by addressing root causes such as inequality, corruption, and family breakdown.

3.2. Research design

This study adopts an interpretative paradigm rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics, emphasizing understanding over measurement. Interpretivist research, as Pervin and Mokhtar (2022) note, explores subjective phenomena within social contexts, making it ideal for examining how local norms and beliefs shape moral perceptions. The idiographic nature of this approach prioritizes depth, with Mohapatra and Satpathy (2022) highlighting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as effective for capturing complex human experiences.

Addressing moral decay in postcolonial African contexts requires a context-sensitive and methodologically sound research design that captures the complex interplay between personal behavior, cultural norms, and institutional influence. Phenomenology enables exploration of lived experiences and ethical shifts through narratives from youth, elders, and

religious leaders, as highlighted by Ibrahim (2023), who stresses the role of value re-orientation within communal settings.

3.3. Approach

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach centered on understanding human actions and meaning-making within social contexts. Pervin and Mokhtar (2022) note that interpretivism, qualitative, and phenomenological methods are closely linked in their focus on lived experiences. Rather than relying on fixed variables, this paradigm embraces the evolving nature of human understanding (Wiesner, 2022), allowing for direct engagement with participants to explore the impact of moral decay.

To address this crisis, scholars advocate multi-sectoral, value-driven strategies involving education, religion, family, and policy reform. Value re-orientation reviving societal ethics through education and community engagement, is key. Ibrahim (2023) underscores the role of moral education and parental involvement in curbing youth vices, while Tinyani (2018) promotes an Afrocentric, culturally rooted approach to restoring moral consciousness.

3.4. Data collection

Data were collected through focus groups and semi-structured interviews with 24 participants (14 females, 10 males; ages 19–42), including youth, congregants, and individual interviewees. Data were collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Given the qualitative nature of the study, semi-structured interviews proved particularly effective, as they allowed for the collection of rich, detailed information while remaining aligned with the study's objectives. As Megaldi and Berler (2020) note, semi-structured interviews enable researchers to explore topics in depth while following a flexible yet guided format. Additional data were gathered through focus group discussions involving congregants and community members. This method is especially suitable for exploring social issues in depth. Unlike statistically representative sampling, participants in focus groups are deliberately selected to provide diverse yet relevant perspectives on the topic.

3.5. Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis emphasizes the preservation of contextual richness and participant meaning, ensuring that the subtleties embedded in narratives are not lost during

interpretation. As Im et al. (2023) explain, the process involves systematic reduction and organization of data, where irrelevant or redundant information is excluded to maintain analytical focus. Through iterative coding and categorization, researchers distill large volumes of data into coherent themes that reflect the underlying patterns and meanings. This thematic development is central to deriving insightful interpretations that are grounded in participants' lived experiences

3.6. Research Ethics

Ethical considerations underpin the integrity of this interpretive research, ensuring participant protection, dignity, and autonomy throughout the investigative process. Guided by formal clearance from Eswatini College of Theology ethics committee, the study engaged key community stakeholders such as churches and local leaders to facilitate transparent, culturally sensitive access. Informed consent was obtained through clear, voluntary communication of risks, benefits, and procedures, respecting participants' autonomy as emphasized by Memon et al. (2024). Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded through secure data handling and coded identification, while researcher reflexivity and positional awareness minimized bias and upheld academic credibility (Kang & Hwang, 2023; von Unger, 2021). These ethical commitments, coupled with rigorous thematic analysis of transcribed interviews, reflect contemporary calls for socially responsible and epistemologically sound research practices (Drolet et al., 2023; Subramani, 2025).

4. Results and Discussion

The interpretation of research findings is a critical phase in any academic inquiry, as it bridges empirical evidence with theoretical understanding. This discussion interprets the findings on moral decay in Eswatini, revealing key contributing factors such as youth exposure to explicit content on social media, absent fathers leading to broken family structures, and the decline of Ubuntu, a communal moral philosophy. These elements, along with consequences like rising crime, teenage pregnancies, and loss of trust, align with broader African discourse on ethical decline (Chinedu, 2024; Metz, 2024). By situating the data within sociocultural and moral theory, this analysis explores how the church might act as a stabilizing force, offering pathways toward ethical renewal through contextual theology and community engagement.

The results of the study answered the following questions: a) What are the major causes of moral decay among communities of Eswatini? b) How is moral decay affecting the communities in Eswatini? c) What role can the church play in fighting moral decay in Eswatini? Thematic analysis was applied where themes and sub-themes that fulfil the research objectives were formed. The participants were quoted to support the interpretation of data. On the first research question that sought to find the major causes of moral decay among communities in Eswatini, the themes that emerged include 1) the advent exposure of young people to explicit content on social media, 2) dysfunctional families due to absent fathers, 3) and the loss of Ubuntu.

When societies experience moral decay, it can lead to a wide array of consequences. These can affect everything from individual relationships to national institutions. These effects, according to the study includes 1) increased crime rates, 2) no respect for people and prosperity, 3) rise in teenage pregnancies, and 4) loss of trust in other people.

Exposure of young people to explicit content on social media. The participants felt that children's exposure to explicit content on social media is a major contributor to the decaying morals. The young people tend to normalize inappropriate behaviours because the content they are exposed to makes them less sensitive. This in turn erodes the traditional moral values and standards. According to FGD 2;

> "*Social media is promoting moral disengagement. This is evidenced by some of our peers who justify or rationalize unethical behaviours. Such behaviours, would in turn promote a decline in personal accountability and adherence to ethical standards" one youth member exclaimed, to the agreement of the rest!*

Conversely, the elderly lamented the loss of ubuntu amongst today's generation. According to Holism (2023), the philosophy of ubuntu emphasizes brotherly care and concern for others. The Holism philosophy is in line with the biblical teachings of brotherhood and it further aligns with the social capital theory in terms of the church being an institution that is better placed to promote moral values.

Dysfunctional families due to absent fathers. Participant 5 observed that a significant number of children are raised by single parents, grandparents, or other relatives, rather than by

both biological parents. This alternative family structure may influence the quality of parenting, potentially limiting the guidance and discipline that children would otherwise receive from their parents. For instance, grandparents often grant their grandchildren considerable autonomy, which can contribute to behavioral challenges and less structured lifestyles. Participant 5 had this to say;

> "*The family institution has a responsibility to instil some of the values that are critical in building a decent society. Unfortunately, with most children growing up without either one or both of their parents, the children grow without these values. The result will be grown-ups living very questionable lifestyles because they weren't groomed properly."*

This perspective aligns with findings from Chavda and Nisarga (2023), who note that children raised in single-parent households often face emotional and behavioral challenges due to reduced parental supervision and support. They argue that such children may struggle with academic performance, social development, and internalizing core values essential for societal integration.

Loss of ubuntu. Several participants, particularly the elderly, expressed concern over the decline of ubuntu in contemporary generations. They reflected on their upbringing, recalling a time when community, interconnectedness, and mutual care were deeply valued and actively practiced. Their perspective highlights a shift in societal dynamics, where traditional communal support and shared responsibility have diminished over time. Focus group discussion 2 stated;

> "*One thing for sure is that you can't compare life then and now. We grew up at a time when you couldn't do what was considered wrong in front of an elder. A child then belonged to the community. The loss of Ubuntu has significantly contributed to the decay of morals in several ways, i.e., breakdown of community values, decline of mutual respect, erosion of compassion and empathy, weakening of social support systems and increase in individualism."*

Ubuntu embodies principles of cooperation, mutual understanding, and collective growth, promoting a society where dignity and well-being are fundamental priorities. Traditionally, Ubuntu fostered a sense of communal responsibility, ensuring that individuals looked out for one another. However, its decline has led to increased individualism, diminishing respect for both people and their property.

Holism (2023) asserts that Ubuntu underscores brotherly care and concern, reinforcing a philosophy rooted in social responsibility. The essence of Ubuntu is deeply intertwined with the value of communality, highlighting the interconnectedness of individuals within a society and their obligation to support one another.

Rise in substance abuse. All participant groups acknowledged that the increase in substance abuse is a significant factor contributing to the deterioration of moral standards. Participants highlighted that substance use impairs judgement, as drugs and alcohol affect the brain regions responsible for decision-making, impulse control, and ethical reasoning. In particular, damage to the prefrontal cortex - an area crucial for regulating behavior - was identified as a key mechanism through which individuals may engage in unethical or risky actions, such as theft or other forms of misconduct. Participant 6 mentioned that;

> *"In the society we have seen many young people engaged in substance abuse turning out to be more aggressive and violent. Such aggressive and violent behaviours can result in harm to others and contribute to a culture of fear and mistrust within communities."*

The participant further stated that people who abuse alcohol and drugs become more self-centred and less concerned about the well-being of others, leading to a breakdown in social relationships and community values. In a study by Manengelo et al. (2023) which explores the challenges and impacts of single parenting on students' learning, the authors emphasize that single-parent households often struggle with providing adequate guidance, discipline, and emotional support due to limited time, economic hardship, and social constraints. These factors can hinder children's moral development and academic performance, echoing the concerns raised in this discussion.

In addressing the second research question, which explored the extent to which moral decay impacts communities in Eswatini, several key themes emerged from the participant data. These included an increase in crime rates, a general erosion of respect for individuals and property, a rise in teenage pregnancies, and a growing loss of trust among community members. Each theme was supported not only by participants' lived experiences but also by existing scholarly findings, which highlighted how societal shifts in values can destabilize community cohesion. For instance, Sekhaulelo (2021) emphasizes that moral degeneration in

urban communities is often marked by rising violence, weakened interpersonal bonds, and a breakdown in social accountability, patterns that closely mirror the concerns raised by participants in this study. The integration of these perspectives helped enrich the analysis by grounding local narratives within broader theoretical frameworks.

Increased crime rates. Much like substance abuse, rising crime rates can both reflect and fuel moral decline, gradually undermining trust within communities. This was confirmed by participant 4 who stated that;

> "*People become suspicious and fearful, leading to a breakdown in social cohesion and solidarity. This mistrust can diminish the sense of collective responsibility and moral accountability. On the other hand, he further quantified, frequent exposure to crime and violence can desensitize individuals, making them less empathetic and more tolerant of violence and aggression. This desensitization can then contribute to a culture where violent and harmful behaviours are more readily accepted*."

The participant's assertion is confirmed by Sekhaulelo (2021) who shared the same sentiments. He mentions that the failure to accept personal accountability for the high levels of crime has contributed to South Africa's disturbing pathologies in terms of indiscipline, violence, rape, assault, and fraud.

No respect for people and property. Participants emphasized that a decline in moral values, particularly the erosion of ubuntu, contributes to a pervasive lack of respect for individuals and property. The breakdown of communal ethics and social cohesion fosters a generation characterized by diminished empathy, compassion, and mutual regard. Participant 6 mentioned that;

> "*There is need to instill respect for people and property in today's generation. We have now become individualistic people, hence no shared community values which gave birth to a resounding decline of mutual respect."*

Participants highlighted that the erosion of moral values, especially the loss of ubuntu has led to growing individualism and a widespread decline in respect for people, property, and communal harmony. Gumede (2024) explores how the decline of ubuntu in Southern African

communities has led to increased individualism, mistrust, and a weakening of communal bonds. Gumede highlights how values like empathy, mutual respect, and shared responsibility have eroded, contributing to social fragmentation and a diminished sense of collective care, echoing the participants' concerns about the loss of respect for people and property. Disrespect for people and property, and the decline of ubuntu, point to a weakening of shared norms and values, central tenets of social capital that foster empathy, reciprocity, and collective responsibility.

The rise in teenage pregnancies. One of the dominant themes emerging from adult participants was the perception of teenage pregnancy as a manifestation of moral decline. Within the local cultural context, premarital pregnancy, particularly during adolescence, was traditionally regarded as a source of shame for both the individual and their family. As a deterrent, customary practice required the male's family to pay a fine to the female's family, symbolizing an acknowledgment of moral transgression. This practice functioned as a social mechanism aimed at discouraging unplanned or unwanted teenage pregnancies. Participant 7 stated:

> *"The way our young people are conducting themselves is like they are adults, living like adults do. They see no problem in staying with boyfriends, yet they are still school going and dependent upon their parents or guardians. There are just no good morals and if as a parent or guardian you try to enforce such, you are viewed as abusive. Children have totally misunderstood the issue of human rights and used it to live anyhow, under the pretext of rights"*

This traditional approach underscores how deeply entrenched moral values and cultural norms were instrumental in shaping community attitudes and behavioral expectations regarding adolescent sexuality and family honor. Pillay (2025) explores how teenage pregnancy is often framed as a moral issue in South African communities, shaped by cultural expectations around sexuality, family honor, and youth behavior. The article critiques dominant narratives that stigmatize adolescent mothers as morally irresponsible and highlights how these perceptions are deeply rooted in traditional norms and social anxieties about changing generational values closely echoing the concerns raised by your participants.

Teenage pregnancy and substance abuse suggest an erosion of supportive networks and adult supervision what Social Capital Theory would see as a lack of bridging capital that connects individuals to positive role models and resources.

Loss of trust in other people. Another prevailing theme identified by participants was the erosion of interpersonal trust within the community. Participants reflected on a past sense of collective responsibility, where communal values emphasized mutual care and the safeguarding of others' property, even in their absence. Acts such as guiding stray livestock to proper grazing areas were cited as illustrative of this once-strong communal ethos. However, the perceived decline in respect for both people and property was seen as indicative of a broader loss of trust, with many expressing that such reciprocal support is no longer assumed or practiced. Regarding this view participant 5 stated,

> "*In the recent times you cannot leave your home without ensuring that it is securely locked and even with burglar proofs. This is because there is loss of trust in other people and the manner in which people are now conducting themselves. During the times of our grandparents, we are told that mats were used as doors and people would respect other people's homes and not steal from them."*

This shift away from communal interdependence reflects a profound transformation in societal values, where individualism increasingly overshadows the traditional ethos of shared responsibility and collective trust. Lansing et al. (2023) explored how trust is foundational to healthy communities, emphasizing that the erosion of interpersonal and communal trust undermines social cohesion, safety, and mutual support. Modern individualism and systematic inequalities have disrupted traditional trust-building practices, echoing the participant's reflections on the loss of shared responsibility and respect for others' property. The loss of trust reflects a breakdown in bonding social capital, the close-knit relationship and sense of mutual accountability that once held communities together.

All the themes discussed ranging from the rise in teenage pregnancies and substance abuse, to the erosion of respect, trust, and communal values are deeply aligned with Social Capital Theory. This framework emphasizes the value of social networks, shared norms, and mutual trust as foundations for cohesive, functioning societies.

In the last research question, the role that can be played by the church infighting moral decay in Eswatini was explored. From the data gathered we generated the following themes.

The church as a moral compass. Participants viewed the church as a highly respected and influential institution capable of playing a critical role in addressing moral decline in Eswatini. They emphasized that the church has the potential to shape the moral fabric of society by offering ethical guidance, instilling core values, and reinforcing moral teachings within communities. This aligns with findings by Tagwirei (2024) who argues that faith-based institutions are strategically positioned to foster moral consciousness and promote social cohesion in African societies.

However, participants also expressed concern over what they perceived as a moral crisis within the church itself. Some noted that certain church leaders, rather than exemplifying high moral standards, have been implicated in unethical behaviour, including extramarital affairs and the exploitation of young congregants. Such behaviour was seen as undermining the credibility of the church's moral authority. Several participants attributed this to the proliferation of churches led by individuals without formal theological training or ethical grounding. This concern echoes Knoetze (2022) who caution that the absence of theological education among some clergy in Southern Africa may contribute to the erosion of trust in religious institutions.

Faith-based interventions in social issues. Participants also emphasized that the church could play a more active role in addressing pressing social issues such as substance abuse, corruption, crime, and family breakdown within communities. They noted that moral decay is often worsened by the widespread use of drugs, particularly among young people. Disturbingly, some adults were said to be complicit, either by directly selling drugs or by turning a blind eye to their distribution. When children and adolescents are under the influence of alcohol or narcotics, their moral compass is severely compromised, leading to behaviours that reflect the erosion of societal values. These findings echo broader concerns in recent literature, which highlights how community-level interventions including faith-based efforts can be instrumental in preventing substance abuse and restoring moral order (Ebrahim et al., 2024).

Church influence on youth morality and behaviour. Participants felt that the church in Eswatini can play a crucial role in curbing moral decay through community-based interventions such as youth mentorship, life skills training, and family counseling, which foster

positive values and strengthen family units (Shabangu & Koen, 2022). Ethical leadership and collaborations with government and civil society on anti-drug and anti-corruption campaigns can address structural drivers of moral decline, while school, prison, and digital ministries expand the church's reach and promote moral resilience across society (Maarman & Lamont-Mbawuli, 2021).

Church-state collaboration in promoting social ethics. In Eswatini's traditional context, participants suggested that the church could meaningfully counter moral erosion by forming respectful partnerships with cultural custodians, especially chiefs, who through the Tinkhundla system (Monarchical democracy) hold substantial local legitimacy and influence. Aligning church engagement with the chiefs' authority and communal values reinforces moral accountability at the grassroots level. This approach resonates with broader scholarship emphasizing the importance of culturally embedded leadership in sustaining community ethics (Tsoko, 2014). Similarly, collaboration between the church and civil society actors such as NGOs and Christian Development Organisations reflects successful models from South Africa, where faith-based partnerships have contributed to youth education, livelihoods training, spiritual growth, and social advocacy (Islam, 2021). These dual partnership pathways between church and traditional leadership, and church and development organisations are grounded in trust and mutual respect, enabling holistic promotion of moral responsibility and community development. This aligns with studies highlighting the role of faith institutions as key stakeholders in national development through synergistic partnerships with government and civil society (van der Merwe, et al., 2014)

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that moral decay in Eswatini is primarily driven by youth exposure to explicit content on social media, the weakening of family structures due to absent fathers, the erosion of Ubuntu, and the rise in substance abuse. These factors contribute to social challenges such as increased crime, teenage pregnancies, loss of respect for people and property, and a decline in interpersonal trust. The study also highlights that the weakening of communal values and social capital has intensified individualism, diminishing collective moral responsibility. Importantly, participants identified the church as a pivotal institution capable of restoring moral order through ethical guidance, youth mentorship, family

counseling, and active involvement in addressing social issues like substance abuse and crime. Effective church interventions would require collaboration with traditional leaders, civil society, and government to rebuild social cohesion and reinforce moral accountability at the community level.

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are suggested to address moral decay in Eswatini:

Strengthen family structures: Promote responsible parenting, father involvement, and family counselling programs to instil core values in children.

Youth empowerment programs: Implement life skills training, mentorship, and recreational initiatives to reduce vulnerability to negative peer and media influence.

Promote digital literacy and media regulation: Educate youth on responsible social media use and advocate for policies that limit exposure to explicit content.

Revive ubuntu and community values: Encourage community-driven initiatives that foster mutual respect, empathy, and collective responsibility.

Church-led moral interventions: Equip churches to provide ethical guidance, run anti-drug campaigns, and engage in youth and family-focused programs.

Collaborative partnerships: Foster church–traditional leadership–civil society collaborations to promote moral accountability and community development.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by Eswatini College of Theology. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearances by Eswatini College of Theology.

Declaration

The authors declare the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the authors used ChatGPT for language editing and paraphrasing of ideas. The authors take full responsibility in ensuring proper review and editing of contents generated using AI.

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