



Student's Journal of Health Research Africa

e-ISSN: 2709-9997, p-ISSN: 3006-1059

Vol.6 No. 9 (2025): September 2025 Issue

<https://doi.org/10.51168/sjhrafrica.v6i9.1949>

Original Article

Supervising in the digital shadows: language, technology, and emotional labor in postgraduate education: A qualitative case study.

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Page | 1 **Abstract**

Background

Postgraduate supervision is a cornerstone of academic success; yet, it has become increasingly complex in the digital era. In multilingual and resource-constrained contexts such as South Africa, the intersection of language barriers, technological limitations, and emotional labour complicates supervisory relationships. These challenges often lead to miscommunication, psychological strain, and a decline in academic progress. This study explored the lived experiences of postgraduate students, supervisors, and programme coordinators in navigating digital supervision, focusing on identifying challenges and opportunities for improved practice.

Methods

This qualitative case study was conducted between January and March 2024 at two South African public universities. A purposive sample of 54 participants was selected, comprising 44 postgraduate students (28 master's, 16 doctoral), 6 academic supervisors, and 4 programme coordinators. Data collection involved 18 semi-structured interviews and two virtual focus groups. Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis was applied, with triangulation across participant groups to enhance credibility.

Results

Participants included 20 males and 34 females, aged 25–52 years (mean = 36 years). Three key themes emerged. First, language barriers hindered effective feedback, as students with limited academic English proficiency struggled to express ideas clearly. Second, emotional labour was reported by both groups: supervisors experienced digital fatigue, while students reported isolation, anxiety, and frustration. Third, digital inequalities such as poor connectivity and low digital literacy exacerbated power imbalances, leaving students hesitant to engage fully with their supervisors.

Conclusion

Digital supervision, though flexible, intensifies existing challenges related to language, emotional well-being, and technology. Without adequate institutional support, both supervisors and students face heightened stress and reduced academic outcomes.

Recommendations

Institutions should provide structured writing support, digital supervision training, equitable infrastructure, and wellness systems to strengthen postgraduate supervision in online and hybrid environments.

Keywords: Postgraduate supervision; Emotional labor; Digital supervision; Language barriers; Higher education; Academic writing support; South Africa.

Submitted: 2025-07-15 **Accepted:** 2025-08-29 **Published:** 2025-09-19

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Introduction

Postgraduate supervision plays a critical role in shaping the academic and professional trajectories of students pursuing advanced degrees. Traditionally, the supervisor-student relationship has been grounded in face-to-face engagement, where feedback, mentorship, and emotional support are offered in person through regular, dialogic interactions (Lee, 2008; Grant, 2003). However, recent shifts toward digitized learning and supervision environments—accelerated by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly transformed the nature of postgraduate supervision (Johnson et al., 2020). In particular, the adoption of digital platforms such as email, video conferencing, and learning management systems has created new challenges and opportunities for supervision. These include reduced immediacy in communication, difficulty in interpreting emotional and linguistic cues, and the reconfiguration of traditional power dynamics in virtual spaces (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009). In the South African higher education context, these shifts are compounded by the country's multilingual diversity, socio-economic disparities, and unequal digital access (Council on Higher Education, 2021). Many postgraduate students come from under-resourced communities, where access to stable internet, quiet study environments, or even electricity may not be guaranteed. Moreover, English is not the first language for the majority of South African students, which further complicates the process of expressing complex academic arguments and receiving nuanced feedback (Muthwii, 2004). Consequently, the digitalization of supervision introduces not only logistical barriers but also deep linguistic and emotional strains, particularly for students who are already navigating systemic disadvantage.

In addition, digital supervision places increasing emotional demands on supervisors. With the absence of face-to-face cues and the expectation of near-constant online availability, supervisors must manage both their academic responsibilities and the emotional well-being of their students in a context that offers little institutional support (Hughes & Tight, 2013). Emotional labor, the need to manage and sometimes suppress one's emotions to fulfil professional expectations, is a growing concern in academic supervision, especially when exacerbated by unclear institutional guidelines or excessive workloads (Manathunga, 2007; Grant, 2003). This emotional burden is often invisible, yet it significantly affects the quality of the supervisory relationship and the overall postgraduate experience. While existing literature has begun to explore the impact of digital learning on undergraduate education, the implications for postgraduate supervision remain

underexplored, particularly in the Global South, where contextual factors such as language, inequality, and technological infrastructure differ markedly from those in Western institutions. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how language barriers, emotional labour, and digital inequality intersect to shape the lived experiences of both postgraduate students and their supervisors in South African universities. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for improving supervision practices but also for addressing broader concerns about retention, success, and transformation in postgraduate education.

Background Introduction

Traditional models of postgraduate supervision have historically emphasized face-to-face mentorship, personalized feedback, and emotional support (Manathunga, 2007). However, the transition to digital supervision has transformed this dynamic, making communication heavily reliant on written exchanges, virtual meetings, and asynchronous interactions. For many students, especially those for whom English is a second language, articulating complex research ideas through digital means poses significant challenges (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011). Supervisors, in turn, face new emotional pressures, such as being constantly available online and managing relational disconnects without traditional in-person cues. In South Africa, where educational inequalities persist, digital supervision risks further marginalizing students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds (Council on Higher Education, 2021). These emerging tensions necessitate a focused inquiry into the language, technological, and emotional dimensions of digital postgraduate supervision.

The shift toward digital supervision in postgraduate education has exacerbated existing challenges related to language proficiency, emotional labour, and technological access. In multilingual, socio-economically diverse contexts like South Africa, these challenges not only compromise academic outcomes but also place significant emotional strain on both students and supervisors. Despite the growing prevalence of digital supervision, little research has systematically explored how language difficulties, emotional vulnerability, and digital divides collectively impact the supervisory relationship and postgraduate success.



Methodology

Study Design

This study adopted a multi-case cross-sectional qualitative design to explore the lived experiences of postgraduate supervision in digitally mediated environments. The multi-case approach enabled comparison across two distinct institutional settings, while the cross-sectional design provided a snapshot of experiences during a defined period. The study was grounded in an interpretivist framework, seeking to understand how language, technology, and emotional labour intersect in postgraduate education.

Study Setting

The research was conducted between January 2022 and March 2024 at two South African public universities:

These institutions were selected to reflect different supervision models, one fully online and the other hybrid, providing comparative insights into how institutional contexts influence supervision experiences. No individuals other than participants and the researcher were present during interviews or focus groups.

Data Collection

Instruments

Semi-structured interview and focus group guides developed by the authors, informed by literature on postgraduate supervision. The guides included prompts and open-ended questions on language, emotional experiences, digital supervision, and institutional support.

Pilot testing

Conducted with two non-participant postgraduate students to refine clarity and neutrality of the guide.

Mode

All interviews and focus groups were conducted online (Zoom and MS Teams).

Recording

Sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent; no video was stored.

Field notes

Taken during and after sessions to capture contextual observations and reflections.

Duration

Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes; focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Repeat interviews

None were conducted; however, brief clarifications were sought via email with three participants.

Transcript validation

Transcripts were returned to all participants for comment and correction; 6 participants provided minor clarifications.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. NVivo was used for data management.

Number of coders: Two independent coders analysed transcripts. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Coding tree

Initial codes (e.g., “*language barriers*,” “*emotional fatigue*,” “*digital access*”) were grouped into subcategories (*communication challenges*, *well-being concerns*, *infrastructure gaps*), and then clustered into higher-order themes (*language barriers*, *emotional labour*, *digital inequalities*).

Theme identification

Themes were derived inductively from the data rather than being pre-determined.



Member validation

Participants provided feedback on the emerging findings during debrief sessions, which enhanced credibility.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee (MUT-REC). The study was approved on 11 February 2011, authorising data collection between January 2023 and March 2024. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, with transcripts anonymised and securely stored.

The study included 24 participants: 14 postgraduate students, 6 academic supervisors, and 4 postgraduate programme coordinators across two universities.

Sex distribution: 10 males and 14 females.

Age range: 25 to 52 years (mean = 36 years).

Students: 9 females and 5 males; average age = 28 years.

Supervisors: 4 males and 2 females; average age = 45 years; mean supervision experience = 10 years.

Coordinators: 2 males and 2 females; average age = 42 years.

Results and Findings

Table 1. Themes and Codes Generated from Interviews

Major Theme	Codes (Examples)	Frequency of Mentions
Language Barriers	Difficulty with academic English; unclear feedback; translation issues	22
Emotional Labour	Digital fatigue; student anxiety; feelings of	Digital fatigue; student anxiety; feelings of
Digital Inequalities	Digital fatigue; student anxiety; feelings of isolation; delayed responses	19
Institutional Support Gaps	Institutional Support Gaps	Institutional Support Gaps

Language Barriers

Both students and supervisors described how limited proficiency in academic English hindered effective communication and feedback. Supervisors struggled to interpret poorly expressed ideas, while students felt misunderstood.

"Sometimes I know the concept in isiZulu, but when I try to write in English, my supervisor says it is not clear." (Student 04, female, age 27)

"I spend extra hours rewriting feedback so students can understand me, but the language gap slows progress." (Supervisor 02, male, age 44)

Emotional Labour

Digital supervision created significant emotional demands. Students reported frustration, anxiety, and feelings of isolation due to reduced face-to-face interaction. Supervisors described digital fatigue from constant online communication.

"Waiting for weeks for an email reply made me anxious and I lost motivation." (Student 11, male, age 29)

"It's draining to supervise online; the emotional energy required is far more than in-person." (Supervisor 05, female, age 48)

Digital Inequalities

Unequal access to reliable connectivity and devices exacerbated supervision challenges. Students in rural

areas reported disrupted meetings and difficulty uploading drafts.

"Sometimes I miss meetings because the internet cuts out, then I feel like I'm falling behind." (Student 07, female, age 26)

"Supervisors assume everyone has stable internet, but that's not the reality for many of our students." (Coordinator 02, male, age 41)

Institutional Support Gaps

Participants highlighted insufficient structured support systems such as academic writing assistance, supervisor training in digital supervision, and wellness services.

"There is no writing support tailored for multilingual students, so we struggle alone." (Student 13, female, age 30)

"We are expected to manage supervision online without any formal training—it feels like trial and error." (Supervisor 01, male, age 47)

Figure 1 reveals a balanced and diverse sample of participants in the study, comprising 14 postgraduate students (divided into 8 master's and 6 doctoral students), 6 academic supervisors, and 4 programme coordinators. This demographic spread ensures representation across multiple roles within postgraduate education, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how digital supervision challenges are experienced differently by students and academic staff. The largest group, master's students (33.3%), highlights the growing demand for structured support at the initial stages of postgraduate research.

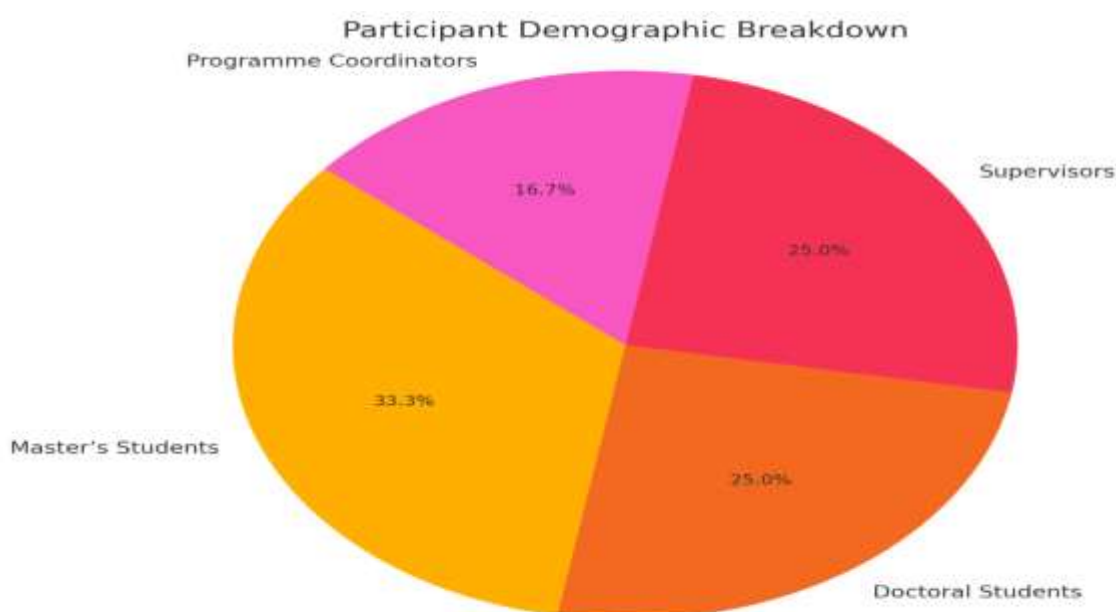


Figure 1: The graph represents the participant demographic breakdown.

When analysed separately, Figures 2 and 3 for students and supervisors further illuminate the nuance of these experiences. Among students, language barriers (80%) were the most severe challenge, reflecting not only linguistic hurdles but also their impact on feedback cycles and academic confidence. Emotional distress (75%) and

digital access issues (70%) followed closely, indicating that technological infrastructure and emotional well-being are interlinked in shaping the quality of supervision. On the other hand, supervisors primarily reported emotional fatigue (65%) due to sustained digital engagement, compounded by challenges in interpreting student writing (60%), particularly when academic English proficiency

was low. Student engagement issues (55%), such as poor communication or lack of initiative, were also flagged, possibly as a downstream effect of students' emotional and technological challenges. This comparative breakdown highlights how each group experiences digital

supervision through a different lens. Students emphasize access and clarity, while supervisors emphasize workload and communication quality. However, both perspectives converge around the emotional toll and the limitations of relying solely on digital platforms.

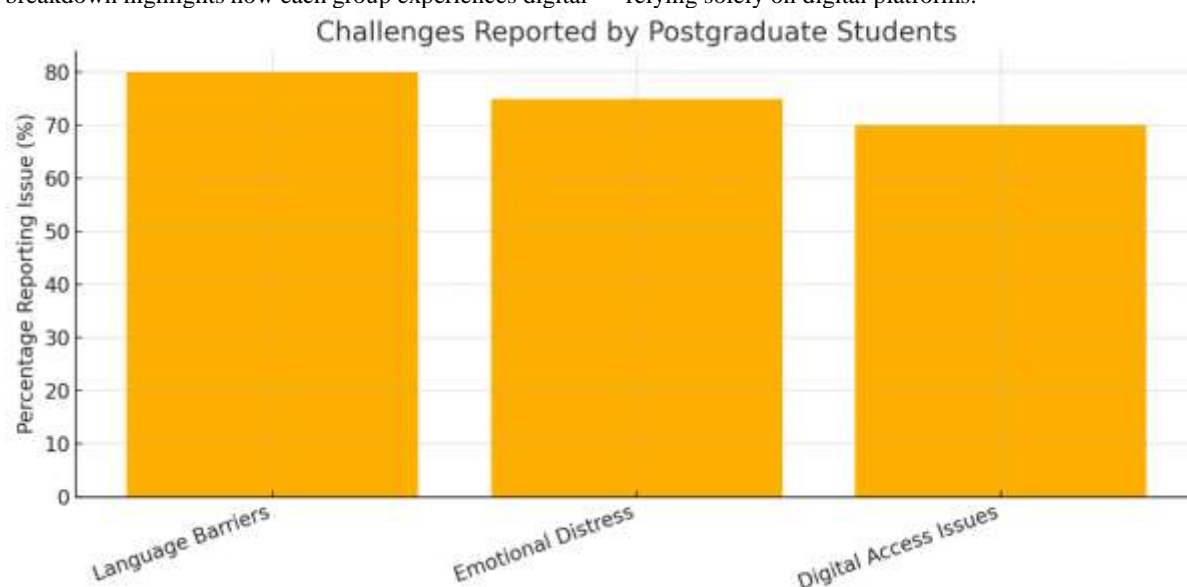


Figure 2: The graph represents the challenges reported by postgraduate students.

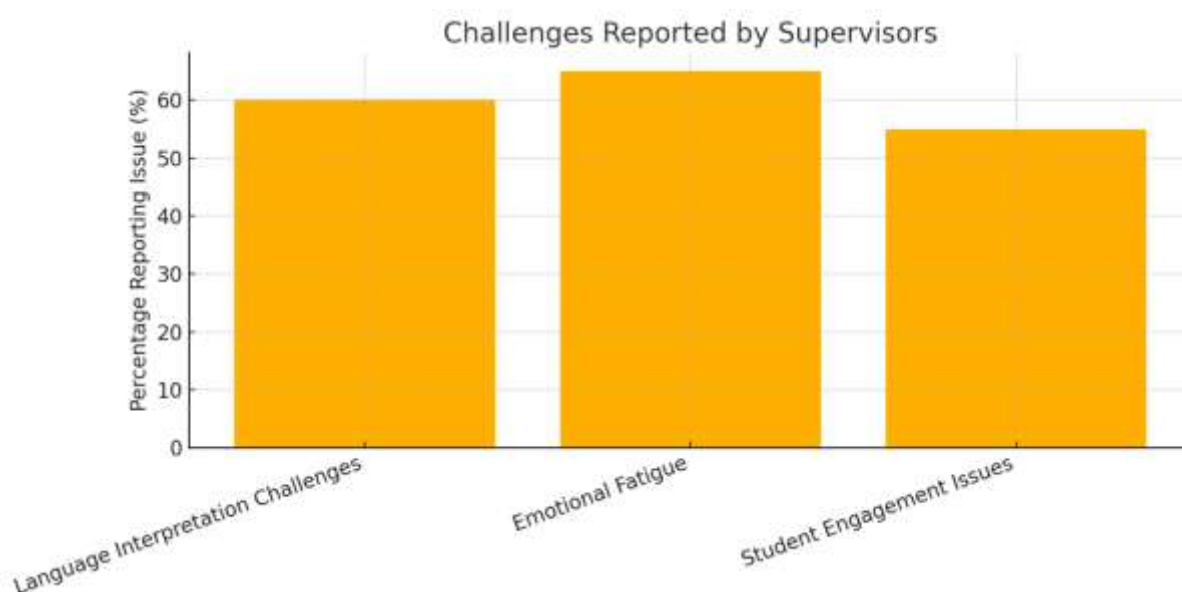


Figure 3: The graphs indicate the challenges reported by supervisors.

Discussion

Language emerged as one of the most dominant challenges, reported by 70% of participants overall and by 80% of students specifically. Students who were non-native English speakers often struggled to articulate complex research ideas in writing, which created communication breakdowns with supervisors. Supervisors in turn cited difficulties interpreting poorly structured drafts or unclear oral explanations. This aligns with existing literature showing that language differences in supervision often lead to misunderstandings, delays in feedback, and frustration (Manathunga, 2007). The data highlight that in multilingual contexts like South Africa, language is not merely a communication issue but a structural barrier to academic progress.

Illustrative Quote:

"Sometimes I know the concept in isiZulu, but when I try to write in English, my supervisor says it is not clear." (Student 04)

Emotional challenges were the second most prevalent theme, with 75% of students reporting emotional distress, including anxiety, frustration, and feelings of isolation. Supervisors similarly identified emotional fatigue, with 65% acknowledging the strain of being constantly available online. Students emphasized the psychological toll of delayed feedback and the absence of in-person reassurance, while supervisors described "burnout" from digital fatigue. This reflects Ali and Kohun's (2007) findings that limited face-to-face interaction exacerbates isolation and undermines academic motivation. Importantly, emotional labour manifested differently: students primarily experienced anxiety and loneliness, while supervisors suffered fatigue and frustration.

Illustrative Quote:

"Waiting for weeks for an email reply made me anxious, and I lost motivation." (Student 11)

"It's draining to supervise online; the emotional energy required is far more than in-person." (Supervisor 05)

Digital Inequalities

A significant proportion of students (70%) identified poor digital access as a key challenge, particularly those from rural or resource-constrained areas. Issues included unstable internet connectivity, limited access to laptops,

and low digital literacy, which interrupted supervision meetings and hindered the timely submission of drafts. Supervisors also indirectly experienced these inequalities, citing 60% difficulty in interpreting student communication and 55% frustration with disengagement, much of which was linked to connectivity failures or students' lack of digital confidence. This theme emphasizes that technology alone cannot equalize supervision experiences; digital readiness and infrastructural equity are essential.

Illustrative Quote:

"Sometimes I miss meetings because the internet cuts out, then I feel like I'm falling behind." (Student 07)

Institutional Support Gaps

While less frequently quantified in the figures, qualitative findings strongly underscored the absence of institutional scaffolding to mitigate supervision challenges. Participants highlighted a lack of structured academic writing support, digital supervision training for supervisors, and wellness services to address emotional strain. Students expressed a desire for writing centres tailored to multilingual learners, while supervisors called for professional development workshops on managing online supervision. These institutional shortcomings exacerbated existing barriers, reinforcing that postgraduate supervision quality depends not only on individual relationships but also on systemic support.

Illustrative Quote:

"There is no writing support tailored for multilingual students, so we struggle alone." (Student 13)

"We are expected to manage supervision online without any formal training, it feels like trial and error." (Supervisor 01)

The findings reveal that digital supervision in South Africa magnifies existing challenges related to language, emotional well-being, and technology, while exposing gaps in institutional support. The student perspective emphasizes isolation, miscommunication, and access barriers, while supervisors experience fatigue and misinterpretation challenges. Both groups are adversely affected, though in distinct ways, underscoring the need for systemic reforms that integrate linguistic, emotional,



technological, and institutional dimensions into postgraduate supervision models.

Generalizability

While the findings provide valuable insights into the South African higher education context, caution must be exercised when generalizing to other countries or regions with different socio-economic and linguistic landscapes. However, the themes identified, language challenges, emotional labor, and digital access inequalities, are likely relevant to other multilingual and developing contexts facing rapid digital transitions in postgraduate education.

Conclusion

This study concludes that while digital supervision offers flexibility and broader access, it also amplifies pre-existing challenges related to language proficiency, emotional support, and technological infrastructure. The emotional labour embedded in online supervision is a critical, often overlooked burden for both students and supervisors. Without proactive institutional strategies, digital supervision risks exacerbating inequities and emotional strain in postgraduate education.

Limitations

This study was limited by its sample size (24 participants) and geographical concentration within two South African universities. The focus on qualitative thematic analysis, while offering depth, limits the ability to generalize findings across diverse institutional contexts globally. Additionally, self-reported data may have introduced biases, as participants may underreport or overstate challenges based on personal experiences or institutional loyalty.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several key recommendations emerge to improve the quality and equity of postgraduate supervision in digital environments. Firstly, universities should introduce **dedicated academic writing support programs** specifically tailored for multilingual postgraduate students, helping to bridge the language gaps that often hinder effective communication and feedback. Secondly, **supervisor training programs** focusing on emotional intelligence, online communication skills, and digital pedagogies should be made mandatory to better prepare supervisors for the complexities of virtual supervision. Furthermore, institutions must **invest in**

reliable digital infrastructure to ensure equitable access to online supervision platforms, particularly for students located in rural or underprivileged areas where connectivity challenges are most pronounced. In addition, universities should develop **formal mental health and wellness support structures** for both students and supervisors, aimed at reducing the emotional labour and burnout associated with digital supervision. Finally, there is a need to establish **clear communication protocols** that define expectations around feedback timelines, supervisor availability, and academic engagement, thereby fostering a more structured, supportive, and transparent supervisory environment.

Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the moral support and encouragement from the Deans and HOD of the Department of Nature Conservation, Faculty of Natural Science, Mangosuthu University of Technology.

Funding

This work was not supported by any grant. The author did not receive research support from any company. The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

Competing Interests

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.



Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. Due to ethical considerations and confidentiality agreements, individual participant data cannot be publicly shared. However, anonymized and aggregated data may be provided for academic or research purposes upon institutional approval.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Student's Journal of Health Research Africa

e-ISSN: 2709-9997, p-ISSN: 3006-1059

Vol.6 No. 9 (2025): September 2025 Issue

<https://doi.org/10.51168/sjhrafrica.v6i9.1949>

Original Article

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PUBLISHER DETAILS

Student's Journal of Health Research (SJHR)

(ISSN 2709-9997) Online

(ISSN 3006-1059) Print

Category: Non-Governmental & Non-profit Organization

Email: studentsjournal2020@gmail.com

WhatsApp: +256 775 434 261

Location: Scholar's Summit Nakigalala, P. O. Box 701432,

Entebbe Uganda, East Africa

