



Barriers hindering drug users seeking access to substance use disorder treatment in the Limpopo Province, South Africa.

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Abstract

Background

Substance use disorders (SUDs) remain a persistent and complex social challenge in South Africa, with disproportionately severe consequences in rural and semi-rural communities. Despite the availability of treatment services, drug users continue to face significant difficulties accessing appropriate care. This study explores the barriers that prevent drug users from seeking and accessing SUD treatment in Mankweng township, Limpopo Province.

Methodology

Guided by a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten drug users actively seeking treatment. Participants were approached and interviewed face to face. A semi-structured interview guide containing open ended questions and probing prompts was used during the data collection process. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, involving systematic transcription, coding, and theme development.

Results

The findings reveal multiple, interrelated barriers that constrain access to treatment, including fear of stigmatisation, limited social and familial support, inadequate information about available treatment services, and the compounding effects of psychological distress, particularly depression and chronic stress. Participants further highlighted the pervasive and debilitating impact of substance use on their social functioning, mental health, and overall quality of life.

Conclusion.

The findings of this study underscore the need for contextually responsive, stigma-reduction interventions, improved dissemination of treatment information, and the integration of psychosocial support within substance use treatment services. Due to a severe financial crisis, numerous households in Mankweng struggle to afford treatment centres for their children. Many expressed willingness to cease drug use, but cannot access treatment centres because no public institutions are available in their area. Addressing these barriers is critical to enhancing treatment accessibility and promoting recovery among drug users in rural South African contexts.

Recommendation.

The study recommends increased community education regarding substance abuse to improve knowledge of drug addiction, empowering drug users with information about accessing SUD treatment resources.

Keywords: Substance abuse; Barriers; Substance use disorder; Treatment; South Africa

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Introduction

Substance abuse has been recognised as a significant global problem, with an estimated 15.3 million people abusing alcohol or drugs and 3.3 million deaths annually due to the issue. Because of the accessibility and affordability of psychoactive substances in their respective regions, such as

alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and glue, their usage has increased (Muthelo et al., 2023). Drug addicts make up more than 60% of all crimes in South Africa. Poverty has been identified in Limpopo province as playing an important role in the development of drug use, and vulnerability rises with other factors like easy access to



drugs (Managa, 2022). Given the prevalence of substance abuse and the challenges faced by drug users in seeking treatment, the study aimed to investigate the barriers that prevent drug users from accessing SUD treatment in Mankweng township, Limpopo. These individuals were part of the drug-using community and encountered several difficulties while pursuing treatment for their addiction.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research approach and design.

The study employed a qualitative approach, which was deemed appropriate for exploring the barriers that hinder drug users from seeking SUD treatment. Qualitative research aims to get deep insights into people's experiences, attitudes, and behaviours, as well as to investigate complicated social processes. This approach allowed the study to dive deeply into the experiences, perceptions, and emotions of drug users regarding treatment-seeking behaviour (Khan,2023). To understand the underlying causes of human behaviour, a qualitative study is essential (Khan, 2023).

The study used a phenomenological research design in the present study. Phenomenological research is a method of inquiry grounded in philosophy and psychology, in which the study describes the lived experiences of participants regarding a phenomenon encountered (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The phenomenological research design enabled the study to investigate the psychosocial barriers for drug users in seeking SUD treatment. Phenomenology is the preferred method for research that focuses on understanding the essence of a specific group of people's lived experiences; therefore, it allows the study to delve deeply into the subjective experiences of drug users facing psychosocial barriers in seeking substance use treatment (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

2.2 Population and sampling.

The target population of this study comprised drug users seeking SUD treatment in Mankweng township of Limpopo Province in South Africa. The study triangulated three sampling methods, namely; purposive, convenience, and snowball, to select the study participants. Campbell et al. (2020) state that in a qualitative study, a small, purposefully

selected sample may be used to increase depth (rather than breadth) of insight. In addition to selecting participants, purposeful sampling is used to choose respondents most likely to provide relevant and helpful information (Campbell et al., 2020). According to Makwana et al. (2023), the snowball sampling approach, also known as chain sampling or successive sampling, involves a respondent recruiting more respondents from their personal network, including friends, relatives, and acquaintances. In this study, 10 participants were selected to participate. All the participants are residing at Mankweng Township, therefore it was easy to meet them. Most of the participants are between the age of 18 to 35 which fall under the youth category. Participants in this study were also referred by their friends who are using drugs and seeking substance use disorder treatment.

2.3 Data collection.

The study gathered data from the participants in this study through semi-structured interviews. Participants were approached and interviewed face to face. A semi-structured interview guide containing open ended questions and probing prompts was used during the data collection process. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their thoughts based on their knowledge and experiences. Unlike other types, this method can explore more in-depth and insightful information through carefully prepared questions about the phenomenon. Personal interviews encourage respondents to give more detailed responses and help them understand the questions better (Alam, 2021). As Busetto et al. (2020) mentioned, discussions can be recorded with audio or video and later transcribed, depending on the researcher and participant's preferences. In this study, interviews were audio recorded then transcribed. The study began by introducing themselves to the participants, explaining the purpose of the interview, informing them that they could decline to participate, however none of the approached participants declined to participate. Participants were also assured that their identities would remain confidential. Participants were interviewed over four weeks, with each session lasting between twenty (20) to thirty (30) minutes. The study used interview schedules and open-ended questions to collect data.



2.4 Data analysis.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis because of its ability to yield detailed, adaptable, and rich insights from substantial amounts of data. (Franz et al.,2019). Thematic analysis (TA) involves identifying, describing, explaining, supporting, and linking themes within data. It is based on the idea that all information conveys meaning, which can be uncovered by identifying a core idea or a group of ideas that offer a comprehensive understanding. (Kampira & Meyer, 2021). The study conducted the six-phase thematic content analysis once the data had been collected, as outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Step 1: Familiarising oneself with data.

During this stage of the theme data collection, the study involved familiarization with the information gathered. The data were carefully read and transcribed. Notes were taken on codes that needed to be developed.

Step 2: Create initial codes.

After familiarization with the data, a list of ideas was compiled. To ensure consistency and credibility of the coded data, the study involved 2 coders to code the data.

Step 3: Searching for themes

Themes were identified after compiling the coding outcomes. These themes help to organise the identified codes into groupings depending on their meaning. The topics identified were divided into themes and sub-themes.

Step 4: Reviewing themes

Themes were examined after being developed to see how closely they complemented the coded data extraction. Thereafter, the data was organised into preliminary theoretical frameworks.

Step 5: Defining and naming themes

The themes were well-defined and given names. Instead of just identifying specific subjects, themes examine trends in

the data and provide a direct response to the research question.

Step 6: Writing Up

The report was written after the final analysis had completed. The study produced a report that includes a detailed review of the codes and themes, along with excerpts from the original data to support their conclusions.

2.5 Ethical Considerations.

The study was approved by the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee.

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3. Findings and discussions.

This section outlines the findings of the study, while it also provides a nuanced discussion regarding the barriers that hinder drug users from seeking SUD treatment within the Limpopo Province. The following themes and sub-themes were generated, which are presented thematically.

3.1 Theme 1: Barriers impeding drug users from seeking SUD treatment.

3.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Depression and stress.

Most of the participants showed that they are reluctant to seek SUD treatment due to depression and stress. They demonstrated that they engage in drugs to run away from reality, stress, and depression. The drug users also indicated that they need help to quit drugs; however, they face challenges such as stress and depression. They indicated that when they are smoking, they feel better, and they stress less as compared to when they have not smoked.

Participant 4: "I smoke Nyaope, and it helps me to stay stress free because after smoking I forget about reality and what happens around me. I do need help, but I am afraid of staying sober minded due to stress and depression."

These findings exhibited that some drug users seeking SUD treatment use drugs to escape from their realities, which are



often marked by stress and other issues. The study find that people who are stressed out may turn to substances as a coping method, creating a vicious cycle that makes it difficult to detect the need for treatment. Mohamed et al. (2020) noted that some individuals claimed that using drugs or alcohol is a common way to deal with emotional issues. Depression can cause emotions of hopelessness and a lack of motivation, leading people to assume that treatment will not be effective. Mohamed et al. (2020) further state that Individuals seeking treatment for drug addiction frequently express anxiety and depression.

3.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Fear of stigmatisation.

The participants strongly highlighted stigma associated with drug use during the interviews; they indicated that community members ill-treat them and do not feel part of the community due to their drug use. Wogen and Restrepo (2020) define public stigma as a prejudice and discrimination against a specific group, such as those with substance use disorders.

Participants reported that their family members do not even want to listen to them when they ask for help. This is in accordance with Nyashanu (2022), who says that research consistently demonstrates that stigma is a significant barrier to substance use treatment.

Participant 7: *"I am seeking help to stop smoking drugs however people out there are judgmental, they treat drug users very bad, they call us with names such as 'Nyaopes' and say we do not bath, as a result I see it difficult for me to seek help because they will judge me as they usually judge drug users in the community."*

The stigma associated with drug use is a substantial barrier to getting help, as evidenced by participants' reports of being judged and mistreated. Wogen and Restrepo (2020) argue that Individuals with alcohol or drug addiction may avoid seeking treatment due to stigma. This stigma reduces their motivation to seek treatment and contributes to feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. Shahid and Asmat (2023) also state that negative attitudes towards individuals with SUD can negatively impact their mental health and reduce their willingness to seek treatment.

Sub-theme 3: Perceived lack of need to seek SUD treatment.

Other participants indicated that they do not see any need to seek treatment because they consider dagga and alcohol as soft drugs, and it has become their daily routine. As stated by Nyashanu (2022), research in South Africa shows that individuals from low socioeconomic origins, where substance use is more prevalent, are more likely to be unaware of their need for SUD treatment. Readiness and motivation were seen to be significant barriers for drug users to seek SUD treatment for some of the drug users in Mankweng. These are the responses provided by the participants:

Participant 9: *"I started drinking alcohol long time ago and I do not perceive alcohol as a strong substance that I could seek help for."*

Participant 2: *"My substance abuse is not severe as compared to others, I can control my urge to smoke, and I do not usually encounter side effects. And I also do not think I need to go to rehab because I am able to control my addiction for Nyaope."*

The findings suggest that some drug users do not see the need to seek SUD treatment because they cannot recognise the long-term effects of substance abuse. The participants say that they live normal lives just like others in the community. Participants' willingness to seek SUD treatment shows that some do not see the need and are not willing to ask for help. As stated by Oguizu et al. (2019), readiness to change refers to a person with substance use disorder (SUD) recognising their problem, wanting to change, and understanding the harm if they do not. Oguizu et al. (2019) also explain that not starting, continuing, or following treatment can stem from a lack of motivation or readiness for change.

3.1.3 Sub-theme 4: Cultural normalisation of drug use.

Most participants indicated that culture plays a significant role in their reluctance to seek SUD treatment. They mentioned that substances such as dagga are perceived as cultural norms within the Rastafarian religion, which makes seeking treatment seem unnecessary to them. Nyashanu



(2022) states that individuals may not see the need for treatment because of cultural views that normalise substance use within certain groups. One drug user stated that substance abuse has been normalised by gang activity in the community. Nyashanu (2022) argues that the Cape Flats drug subculture in South Africa is a notable example, including gang activity, a strong culture of drug use, and competition for control of a profitable drug trade.

The participants responded as follows:

Participant 1: *“I am a Rastafarian, smoking dagga is part of our religion, it is our identity therefore I do not see any need for me to seek help to stop smoking dagga”*

Participant 2: *“as part of one of the gangsterism group in the community, I have normalized smoking drugs because it represents us.”*

These findings suggest that some drug users do not see the need for SUD treatment due to cultural norms surrounding drugs. It shows that the normalisation of drugs by certain cultural groups prevents members of those groups from seeking treatment and makes them unaware of the need to seek help, as they do not perceive a necessity for SUD treatment (Karimuhenga & Singwane, 2025). This aligns with Nyashanu (2022), who states that the norms and values of cultural subgroups both promote drug use and hinder drug users from recognising the need to control their usage or seek treatment. Some participants' opinions that substances like beer and dagga are "soft drugs" indicate that their use has become normalised. This perspective can lead to a lack of urgency or awareness of potential risks and the importance of treatment.

3.1.4 Sub-theme 5: Perceived lack of support.

Most participants revealed that their family members have given up on them because they are taking drugs. They indicated that their families play a significant role in their struggle to resist treatment due to a lack of support. They strongly believe that seeking treatment depends on them as individuals; however, support from family and friends can have a significant impact on their SUD treatment-seeking behaviour. They further mentioned that they are no longer permitted to return home, which also influences their decision to seek treatment. As stated by Dopp et al. (2022),

family members' assistance (e.g., informational, material, and emotional) has a major and long-term impact on individuals' recovery from substance use disorders.

The participants responded as follows:

Participant 3: *“My family has given up on me, they do not support me at all. They even kicked me out at home, I do need help, but the challenge is the lack of family support, there is nobody who show love and support which makes it difficult for me to go and seek help. My family has never tried to offer me help or to show me love instead they push me away, even children have lost respect towards me. My mother does not even want to see me, I am being labelled as a black sheep of the family hence there is nobody who ever smoked drugs in the entire family.”*

Participant 9: *“The friends that I have are the ones that I smoke with, there is no motivation I get from them to quit drugs instead they are the ones who adds to the burden of drugs, because today one friend come with drugs the next day another friend come with drugs, therefore friends have a great influence in myself seeking SUD treatment.”*

Participant 6: *“I have tried to reach out to my family and asked for help to take me to rehab, but he kicked me out at home.”*

These findings demonstrate the influence of social relationships on drug users' decisions to seek SUD treatment. Most participants indicated that family dynamics, unsupportive families, and friends play a role in they are remaining engaged with substances. The findings suggest that unsupportive families have a significant impact on drug users seeking treatment. They highlight the importance of positive social support for drug users, which can come from friends, family, or community members. Dopp et al. (2022) state that social support refers to the feeling of being valued and cared for by others, and it might manifest as information, material aid, or emotional validation. The study emphasise that positive support from family and friends is essential for the recovery process of drug users; they can significantly contribute by providing support, financial help, and materials to those in need of SUD treatment.



3.1.5 Sub-theme 6: Lack of information about SUD treatment resources.

Participants claimed to know little about SUD treatment options. They indicated that while they are looking for help, they are uncertain of where they can go for help with their substance use disorder. Additionally, the participants stated that they are unsure of where to locate rehabilitation facilities.

The participants responded as follows:

Participant 2: *"I do not know where the rehabilitation centres are around Mankweng, the only rehab I know of is in Seshego and it is very far, one needs money to go there which I do not have".*

Participant 4: *"Here in Mankweng there is no rehabs, there are little facilities that assist people who seek help to stop smoking, right now I need help to stop smoking Nyaope but I do not know where I can go and I do not know about the process to undergo to get treatment."*

These findings indicate a significant gap in awareness and accessibility to substance use disorder (SUD) treatment facilities. This lack of knowledge about accessible options, along with budgetary constraints, is a common barrier to persons seeking assistance. As articulated by Nyashanu (2022), Limited information about treatment options is a significant reason substance users do not seek help. The study assert that community-based awareness campaigns and support initiatives are essential for educating drug users about the range of substance use disorder treatment options.

The findings of the study highlight the challenges that drug users encounter when seeking SUD treatment, such as the perceived lack of support, depression, stress, the perceived lack of need for treatment, and the fear of stigmatisation. The findings demonstrate the significant role these barriers play in drug users' decisions to seek treatment. In sub-theme three, the findings reveal that most drug users' decisions to seek treatment are influenced by a lack of support, particularly from family. Consequently, it is reasonable to infer that drug users seeking SUD treatment face numerous challenges.

4. Generalizability

The findings of the study cannot be generalized to other provinces, townships, and rural areas as the study was only conducted in Mankweng Township.

The sample size of the size included only 10 participants, which may not be used to represent all drug users seeking treatment in entire Limpopo Province.

5. Limitations

Small sample size: The study included only 10 participants which may not represent the larger part of the drug users in Mankweng Community.

6. Recommendations

The study recommends increased community education regarding substance abuse to improve knowledge of drug addiction, empowering drug users with information about accessing SUD treatment resources.

The study also recommends governments to construct several public rehabilitation centres in Mankweng and nearby areas so that drug users in Mankweng and surrounding areas can have access to them. This is because many participants said they could not afford the high cost of private institutions.

7. Conclusion.

The study examined the barriers that prevent drug users from accessing substance use disorder treatment in Mankweng Township, Limpopo Province. The findings highlight the challenges faced by drug users when seeking SUD treatment. Participants identified barriers such as stigma and depression, a perceived lack of need for treatment, cultural acceptance of drug use, a perceived lack of information about SUD treatment options, and a perceived absence of support. It was also found that the youth in Mankweng lack knowledge about available SUD treatment options and how to access SUD services to address their drug-related issues.



The stigma linked to drug users hinders their willingness to seek treatment for substance use disorders (SUDs). Many participants reported that some of their families had abandoned them since they started using drugs, leaving them without a support figure to encourage help-seeking. Due to a severe financial crisis, numerous households in Mankweng struggle to afford treatment centres for their children. Many expressed willingness to cease drug use, but cannot access treatment centres because no public institutions are available in their area.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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List of abbreviations

SUDs Substance Use Disorders

TA Thematic Analysis

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author contributions

All authors contributed substantially to the writing, reviewing, and editing of the manuscript.

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