

Enhancing technology in counselling university students on drug and substance abuse

Abstract

In this empirical study, we explore the integration of technology in counselling university students struggling with drug and substance abuse (DSA). The increasing prevalence of DSA among this demographic poses significant challenges, exacerbated by easy access to substances and peer influence. Our research identifies the inconvenience of traditional physical counselling sessions, which often conflict with students' academic commitments, as a major barrier to seeking help. The framework for our study is grounded in Bandura's social learning theory (SLT), which emphasises problem-solving without reliance on drugs. Employing a mixed-methods approach, we collected and analysed data from both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys administered to a diverse student population. Our findings reveal that technology-enhanced counselling offers a safe, flexible, and engaging environment for students to address their substance use issues. Additionally, we found that students feel more comfortable communicating through digital platforms, highlighting the necessity of adapting counselling services to their preferences. However, privacy and security concerns must be addressed to ensure effective engagement. In conclusion, the study asserts that leveraging technology in counselling can significantly improve accessibility and support for university students grappling with DSA, emphasising the need for universities to invest in developing user-friendly digital platforms for this purpose. University counsellors provide counselling services to students.

Keywords: education, technology, counselling, students, drugs and substances

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DOI: 10.38140-joheti-2025v1i1a5

Received: 11 December 2024

Accepted: 12 March 2025

Published: 22 April 2025

Copyright:

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Published by: Central University of Technology,
Free State

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1. Introduction

Drug and Substance Abuse (DSA) is a challenge affecting the youth and the public in Zimbabwe. The government of Zimbabwe has intensified its crackdown on drug abuse, resulting in over 10,000 arrests between January and February 2025. DSA causes mental health challenges, and in some cases, individuals engage in DSA as a coping mechanism for mental health issues. Access to counselling services through traditional face-to-face interaction poses problems for most students. Students' busy schedules make it difficult for them to access these services. The focus of the study is to explore ways to optimally use technology to reach out to university students with counselling interventions targeting drug and substance abuse (DSA). The drug and substance abuse pandemic are a worldwide problem, and Zimbabwe declared it a national disaster in 2023. Drug and substance abuse is a public health concern that affects the growth and development of the population. According to the 11th post-cabinet press briefing on 23 April 2024, since January 2024, about 6,148 people have been affected by drug and substance abuse, either as suppliers or end users (11th Post Cabinet Press Briefing, 23 April 2024). What are the causes of drug and substance abuse by students at universities? How do students consume drugs and substances? What intervention strategies can be implemented to reduce drug and substance abuse in universities?

The focus of the study is to explore ways to optimally use technology to reach out to university students with counselling interventions on drug and substance abuse. The pandemic is a worldwide problem, and Zimbabwe declared it a national disaster in 2023. Drug and substance abuse is a public health concern that affects the growth and development of the population (11th Post Cabinet Press Briefing, 23 April 2024). Some university students fail to complete their studies due to addiction to drugs. Previous research by Bloss and Isaacs (2022) in South Africa revealed a substance use prevalence rate of 62.7%. The most prominent substances used by students were alcohol (80.6%), cannabis (46%), and ecstasy (5.3%). Thus, the prevalence of drug and substance abuse among university students has become a growing concern globally. With easy access to various substances and peer pressure, many students are at risk of developing substance abuse problems. It is imperative for universities to provide effective counselling and support services to address this issue and prevent its harmful effects on students' health and academic performance. Embracing technology in counselling can be a promising approach to reach a larger number of students and provide them with the necessary support and guidance.

2. Theory: Social Learning Theory

The study employed Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) that suggests that learning takes place in a social environment and can happen through observation and imitation, rather than only through direct reinforcement. Bandura suggested that behavior is determined by a combination of personal factors, environmental factors, and the behavior itself (Bandura, 1977). This model is especially helpful in examining drug and substance abuse among college students, as it highlights the importance of social norms, peer pressure, and observed behaviors in starting and maintaining substance use. Observational learning is a key aspect of Bandura's theory, where individuals observe and learn behaviors from others. Students in university settings frequently encounter different social situations where substance use is commonly seen. Studies show that classmates have a notable impact on how students view and engage in substance use (Borsari & Carey, 2001). For example, students might witness their peers using drugs or alcohol at social gatherings, leading to these behaviors becoming more acceptable and making them more likely to join in (Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). The importance of social modeling in drug and substance abuse is emphasized by the predictive power of peer influence.

Vicarious reinforcement, a crucial element in SLT, refers to how individuals are more inclined to mimic behaviors that they observe being rewarded in others. If college students see their friends being rewarded socially, like being accepted, popular, or excited, for using substances, they might be inspired to do the same (Kaysen et al., 2006). This is especially important in situations where drug use is glorified or linked to popularity. These conditions can create a loop of support that makes drug usage seem normal for students. As per Bandura, behavior, personal factors, and environmental factors continuously influence each other, resulting in reciprocal determinism. In the context of substance abuse, this interaction can form a cycle (Bandura, 1986). One example is when a student starts using drugs to blend in with a social circle (behavior). This, in turn, changes their personal beliefs on drug use acceptability, reinforcing their connection with that peer group (environmental factor). This process can strengthen their substance abuse in the long run, leading to challenges in breaking free from these habits.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a post-positivist paradigm, which acknowledges that while knowledge is constructed through social constructs, it also recognizes the influence of the empirical world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The research design is mixed methods, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of DSA among university students (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). A total of 40 participants were included, comprising 35 students and 5 staff

members, representing approximately 10% of the total population. Participants were selected using an online sample size calculator and chosen to achieve a balance between quantitative reliability and qualitative depth.

The research questions focus on understanding the impact of technology on counselling for DSA and exploring the experiences of individuals seeking help. Data collection involved multiple methods, including structured questionnaires with closed questions for statistical analysis (Bryman, 2016) and semi-structured interviews to gather detailed insights. Data was collected over three sessions, with each session lasting approximately two hours.

To ensure data credibility and validity, the research employed member checking, allowing participants to review and confirm interpretations of their contributions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The qualitative data was analysed thematically, identifying patterns and insights relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006), while the quantitative data was subjected to statistical analysis for generalization across demographics. This mixed-method approach not only enriched the data collected but also enhanced the overall rigour and validity of the findings (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Ethical considerations were prioritized, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study without repercussions.

4. Findings

This section presented the findings of the study.

4.1 Accessibility and Early Exposure to Drugs

The study established that drugs and substances are easily available to students. UNICEF (2023) highlighted that users spend an average of 2.00 United States Dollars per day to satisfy their needs. Mental health issues contributed to addiction to drugs and substances, and drugs and substances also caused mental health issues. Academic pressure, family background, financial challenges, and relationship issues were the major causes of drug and substance abuse.

The research found that some students began abusing drugs while still in secondary school; one participant started when he was in Form 1. He noted that his parents were always quarreling and fighting, depriving him of the secure home environment he needed. He turned to drugs (specifically marijuana) as a way of coping with the distress he was experiencing. He became a drug addict during the second term of Form 1 and realized that he could not function without drugs. Upon enrolling at the university, he quickly connected with other drug users through gang communication facilitated by technology. Subsequently, these drug users developed a common language that they kept to themselves. All participants indicated that they use social media to connect with drug dealers and peers. The desire for social acceptance was also mentioned as a factor that causes university students to abuse drugs and substances. While drugs and substances provide relief to users, they ultimately become toxic.

4.2 The Impact of Technology on Substance Abuse and Counselling

The study also found that most students prefer to receive counselling sessions on drugs and substances through technology. They are not afraid of victimization compared to face-to-face sessions. Some participants alluded to the fact that they are not assured the counsellor will not report them to the police if they attend a face-to-face counselling session. The major fear associated with accessing face-to-face sessions on drugs and substances is that gangsters may target them for revealing drug-related secrets. It was established that there is a gang culture that members must adhere to; breaking the rules would render them insecure. One participant stated, *"If you release the gang secrets, you are in danger such that you can even risk your life."* Such views are corroborated by the fact that with technology, anonymity is assured, as most students use pseudonyms on their devices and can change them regularly. Therefore, embracing technology for addressing drug and substance abuse can yield more positive results at universities than using the traditional face-to-face approach.

In the study, 90% of respondents indicated that with technology, awareness campaigns are fast, easy, and effective. The counsellor-student ratio is 1:3,300, making effective face-to-face counselling sessions nearly impossible. The use of e-counselling, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and calls can help address the challenge of the counsellor-student ratio. Technology makes counselling services accessible at the client's convenience. Follow-up sessions are more effective when technology is embraced. For drug and substance addicts, frequent counsellor support is crucial to deal with relapse effects. The sense of belonging was identified as a critical factor for victims to wean themselves off from the drug and substance gang culture. The counsellor can monitor and support many students in a short period of time using technology.

4.3 Peer Influence and Social Dynamics

Drug and substance abuse affects female students as well. One of the female participants narrated that she was recruited through popcorns unknowingly. She arrived at the gang with the hope of working on a group assignment as per appointment. She found the group members enjoying popcorn and joined them. The popcorn was spiced with crystal meth but she was not told of it. After a few minutes, she felt confused and restless, only then realising that she had been drugged. Matsikiti (2023) asserts that the injection of confectionery products such as scones, popcorn, and muffins laced with drugs complicates the problem. It is important for youths to be aware of the circumstances surrounding drugs and substances. Technology is the vehicle through which information can travel fast without losing its meaning.

Crystal meth, bronchodilators, and codeine are offered for free for the first time, leading to cravings thereafter. Subsequent use of these drugs will require the client to purchase them. With these drugs, some students are recruited unknowingly. This is how serious drug and substance abuse is in institutions of higher learning. Counselling services have a significant task in fighting the pandemic at university.

4.4 Mental Health and Coping Mechanisms

It was found that some drug addicts want to stop taking drugs but cannot do so due to pressures exerted by group members through social media. In these groups, they also discuss how to avoid arrest, maintain the group, and recruit more members using technology. One participant alluded to the fact that drug dealing is a lucrative business that can be started with a small capital. With the economic crisis prevailing in the country, most youths are tempted to venture into drug dealing as a means of survival. It is easy to conceal drug activities. One participant mentioned that when someone visits the bathroom, there are stubs of cigarettes that would have been smoked there, along with wrappers from bubble gum and sweets. He asked the researcher, *'Why do you think people prefer to smoke in bathrooms if it is only cigarettes?'* Smoking cigarettes is not prohibited at the university. One can understand the complex nature of drug abuse at universities if they increase their interaction with students on social media. Cigarettes are often smoked after drugs and substances have just been taken, and smoking is done in secluded places to conceal the delinquent activity.

The study also established that some young people prefer drug and substance abuse interventions from peers. They are likely to respond positively to interventions from peers rather than adults, as they share many life experiences in common. There is no generation gap, which is often a barrier when interventions are led by adults. Cross-cultural issues between the counsellor and the students can affect implementation strategies for drug and substance abuse. The use of technology can help mitigate challenges arising from cross-cultural issues. On a different note, the results show that some students prefer help from those who have gone through the same predicament. Exposure to and experience with drug and substance abuse is valued by many young people. One participant stated, *'I respect help that comes from a person who was once an addict of drugs and substances; it's not about our age. What matters is the experience in the subject, how it feels when drunk, and the process of withdrawal and recovery is important to me.'*

In the study, 80% of respondents noted that peer pressure, social anxiety, and party culture were factors that led students to abuse drugs and substances. Musicians target towns and cities close to universities to stage shows during the semester. With the newfound freedom some students experience for the first time, peer pressure becomes overwhelming, leading individuals to engage in activities similar to those of their peers. In some cases, drug and substance use becomes normalised. One participant mentioned that there was a time when he thought everyone abused drugs and substances.

The study also found that drugs and substances are available on campus, in residences, and off-campus. One cause of drug and substance abuse is the search for belonging. One participant noted that when a student does not get along well with a lecturer or any member of staff, they may seek belonging from gangsters. Rejection is particularly problematic for students who do not have a secure family background.

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study highlight the concerning accessibility of drugs for university students, often initiated in secondary school. Many respondents revealed that they were first introduced to substances during their teenage years, often in social contexts that normalised drug use as a coping mechanism for mental health issues. With drugs easily available on campus and in surrounding areas, students face a continuous cycle of temptation. This early exposure fosters a sense of familiarity with substance use, framing it as a viable solution to emotional, academic, and financial stress. Moreover, the study uncovers that even students from affluent backgrounds engage in drug use, demonstrating that economic status does not determine vulnerability. These insights signify the need for targeted prevention strategies that address accessibility and provide early intervention programmes aimed at preventing adolescent drug use (Kaysen et al. 2006). The study established that even if drugs and substances were usually taken in groups, the effects varied with each individual. Not all of them felt restless after using marijuana; some felt dizzy. The implication is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to interventions regarding drugs and substances.

5.1 The Impact of Technology on Substance Abuse and Counselling

Technology's dual influence on students' relationships with drugs is significant in this study. While it facilitates connections to drug dealers and peers through social media, it also opens avenues for innovative counselling approaches. The ability to engage anonymously mitigates fears surrounding traditional face-to-face counselling, allowing students to discuss their struggles without the fear of stigma or retaliation. The integration of digital platforms for counselling has been shown to lead to quicker and more efficient intervention strategies, capitalizing on the digital literacy of young people. These findings advocate for embracing technology within counselling frameworks, providing a flexible and accessible approach to addiction recovery that accommodates the diverse needs of students. Technology offers a variety of platforms, allowing individuals to choose the specific one that best suits their needs. Each person's path to recovery is unique. Technology provides easy and quick access to specific factors contributing to the individual's addiction and recovery journey. The ITS expert alluded to the fact that technology analyses vast amounts of data, including online behaviour patterns and information keyed in to assess their current situations (O'Hara et al., 2021). Technology enables early intervention strategies that can be implemented to provide timely support and minimize the likelihood of relapse. The drug and substance abuse group created during the study increased interaction between students and the researcher on the topic of drugs and substances. The researcher gained insight into the behaviours of students regarding drug use. Information regarding the factors that lead to drug and substance abuse among university students was shared on the platform.

Many students indulge in drugs and substances as a way of coping with mental health issues such as distress, depression, frustration, worry, guilt, isolation, and rejection. The use of technology in marketing counselling services to address mental health issues could be effective, as these emotional challenges are often exacerbated by financial difficulties. Most students struggle to raise funds for

university fees, accommodation, and food (Cook et al., 2022). Some survive on only one meal per day. One student stated, *"I do not feel hungry when I take drugs, and that goes well with me since I cannot afford three meals per day."* She was raised by a single parent who was not formally employed and was caring for four other children. The due date for registration is particularly stressful for students without the necessary fees. They become overwhelmed and fail to cope with the pressure. One female student mentioned that she experiences sleepless nights and irregular menstrual periods due to this stress. She was introduced to drugs to cope with these stressors. Embracing technology in counselling students can be effective in supporting learners.

5.2 Peer influence and Social Dynamics

The influence of peers emerges as a critical theme within the study, revealing a complex web of social dynamics that fuel substance uses among university students. Drug use is often initiated and perpetuated through peer networks, where the desire for social acceptance drives individuals to conform to group behaviors. The study highlights the role of gang culture, where sharing experiences and engaging in substance use fosters loyalty among members. This shared understanding creates an environment where students feel understood and validated in their struggles. Interestingly, the preference for peer-led interventions underscores the importance of reliable support systems, suggesting that peers who have navigated similar challenges may be more effective in promoting healthier coping strategies than traditional authority figures (Mugari, 2024).

One of the stressors found to lead to drug use was toxic relationships. A heartbroken student felt frustrated to the extent of failing to cope. A 26-year-old male student indicated that when he discovered his girlfriend was dating another man, he felt crushed and sought relief from marijuana. Since then, he has tried many drugs and has reached the point of addiction. Relationship issues at university are a significant concern among students. Similarly, a 22-year-old woman stated that she began smoking when she was in her first year upon realizing that her best friend was dating her boyfriend. She explained that she did not know whom to trust when a close friend could betray her. The students reported that they could not seek face-to-face counselling when they encountered challenges because they were far from campus, and some had never thought counselling would help them deal with these issues.

It was also established that some students who abused drugs and substances did not have financial problems; in fact, they came from affluent families. They abused drugs and substances for fun and companionship, associating drug use with affluence and business purposes. Students from affluent families who abused drugs often recruited their peers into drug abuse (Mukwenda et al., 2021). One participant recounted that a student from an affluent family provided him with drugs while on campus. When the affluent student graduated, the supply of drugs stopped, leading to withdrawal symptoms and distress due to the inability to access drugs. He became overwhelmed to the extent of losing weight.

Technology fosters the sharing of experiences among individuals with similar needs. Although digital communities can be exploited to further drug deals, they can also be used to combat the problem. One participant stated, *"In this digital world, counselling interventions can be effective for drug use among university students, as it is the playground for the youth. In the digital world, information travels very quickly, and intervention strategies for drug use need to keep pace."* The following section is a discussion on the mental health and coping mechanisms.

5.3 Mental Health and Coping Mechanisms

The interplay between mental health and substance abuse was quite clear in the study, such that addressing DSA implies improving the mental well-being of the students in a significant way. Zimbabwe has a drug and substance abuse plan that covers a period from 2024 to 2030. Technology can be embraced in all the seven strategies to increase efficiency and effectiveness. The seven strategies include: supply reduction, demand reduction, harm reduction, treatment and rehabilitation,

community reintegration, policy and legal enforcement, media and communication, as well as resource mobilization and economic strengthening. Technology can monitor and analyse data from several media and other sources to detect trends in drug use, emerging substances, and places of distribution, facilitating prompt responses. Availability of information is quite critical when dealing with such a pandemic. The declaration of the pandemic by the government of Zimbabwe shows the seriousness of drugs and substance abuse. Embracing technology in counselling students on DSA can be an effective way to ensure that the seven strategies resolved by the DSA plan can be achieved (Government of Zimbabwe, 2024).

It emerged in the study that students who were dependent on drugs found it harder to work, felt guilty, and experienced feelings of inadequacy. They faced challenges in relationships. The addiction resulted in poor academic performance and generated unhappiness when they could not achieve their expectations in time. The support group included some students who could not finish their studies on time. Some missed examinations because of forgetting the examination time due to drunkenness. One testified that he spent over 13 hours in deep sleep, encroaching on the examination time. He felt bad about it. He was in the final semester and had to miss completing the degree programme at the stipulated time due to drugs. He was involved in the campaign against drugs and substances at the university as a way of raising awareness of the dangers of drugs.

In the study, 80% of respondents indicated that almost all male drug addicts of crystal meth and bronchi had no interest in sexual activities, while the female addicts expressed being sexually active after taking cannabis and codeine. The effects of the drugs were such that the women could not resist sexual advances. This exposed the girls to sexual abuse with the consequences of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Such views are corroborated by the literature review, which points out that with cannabis and codeine, food appetite is very high, having a negative implication on the budget, which for most students is usually strained (Scherer et al., 2020). The boys lost interest and motivation to maintain relationships. Their girlfriends could not understand their behaviour. Drugs and substances affect the hormones, making them insensitive to the opposite sex.

It emerged in the research study that students who are addicts of drugs and substances relate poorly to members of staff, especially the lecturers. They failed to meet due dates for assignments. Assessment of the students' academic progress was said to be difficult. One of the drug addicts had this to say: 'I am still on my research proposal; my supervisor has not yet approved it. She said my area is not researchable, yet that is the area that I want. I do not want to change anything about it.' The statement shows that the student was not willing to be corrected, which created conflict between the student and the supervisor. The use of technology in counselling was found to be effective in raising awareness about drugs and substances, sharing experiences, and facilitating behaviour change.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study examined the use of technology in counselling university students on drug and substance abuse. Communication is at the heart of drug and substance activities, and technology serves as the medium of communication at universities. Viewing technology as a mode of counselling on drugs and substances in institutions of higher learning enhances the accessibility of intervention strategies. Drug and substance dealers embraced the use of technology before counselling services adopted these modern communication methods. Embracing technology in counselling students on drug and substance abuse (DSA) can be a vehicle through which the Zimbabwe DSA plan can be achieved, increasing both accessibility and visibility of counselling. In the digital era, students prefer accessing counselling support virtually, as it is time-efficient and cost-effective. Above all, it assures clients the much-needed anonymity when dealing with DSA. However, the cost of data and poor connectivity were major challenges cited by students when they were off campus. Students should view counselling as a solution to mental health challenges rather than resorting to drug use. From the above findings, it can be concluded; drugs and substances are abused by university students, both

male and female (Rafique et al., 2024). This has been cited as a consequence of financial shortages, toxic relationships, family background, peer pressure, and work overload, which are the causes of drug and substance addiction. Students possess the gadgets necessary to embrace technology in counselling. The same gadgets they use for learning and social interaction are appropriate for counselling (Scherer et al., 2020). Subsequently, students have access to free data at the university, allowing counselling sessions to take place with minimal interruptions. Occasionally, there are challenges with internet connectivity. From the above findings and recommendations, the study makes the following recommendations to ensure counselling services accessibility through technology. The counselling services department should embrace all social media platforms in addition to the e-counselling platform (O'Hara et al., 2021). This facilitates students to choose the platform that is convenient. Hence, counselors should be provided with mobile internet data to increase availability. Counsellors need to reach out to students regarding drugs and substances. Counselling information should reach students through technology. Students were not comfortable seeking face-to-face counselling services for drugs and substances due to fear of being reported to the police for arrest. Students' profiles should be made available at admission to the counselling services department to offer psycho-social support before the students indulge in drugs and substances as a way of coping with family background-induced mental health issues (Muzaffar, 2017). Thus, peer counselors should be equipped with skills to identify students at risk of drug and substance use. They should embrace technology to facilitate the intervention.

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