



**NAVIGATING THE GAP: UNPACKING THE UNEMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES
OF HIGHER EDUCATION YOUTH GRADUATES IN COLLINS CHABANE
MUNICIPALITY IN THE LIMPOPO PROVINCE.**

BY

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DECLARATION

I, **Kabelo Hope Mthembi**, hereby declare that this mini dissertation titled “**Navigating the Gap: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Higher Education Youth Graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality in the Limpopo Province**” is my original work in both design and execution. I affirm that it has not been submitted to any institution or university for academic purposes and that all referenced materials have been appropriately cited and acknowledged.

Signature: 

Date: 25 June 2025

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my supportive and loving parents, ***Godwin Amigo Mthembi*** and ***Sophy Mankwana Mthembi***, and the loving memory of my grandfather, ***Walter Skhalele Mthembi***.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

HCTREC	Human and Clinical Trials Research Ethics Committee
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LDT	Latent Deprivation Theory
RDM	Research Data Management
SA	South Africa
SAGERC	South African Graduate Employability Research Consortium
STATS SA	Statistics South Africa
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNIVEN	University of Venda
WHO	World Health Organization

ABSTRACT

In the past few years, graduate unemployment has considerably increased in South Africa and around the world. The rising unemployment rates among unemployed youth graduates have impacted communities' quality of life.

The main purpose of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of higher education graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality, in the Vhembe district of the Limpopo province. The study area for the proposed study was chosen to be a selected community in Collins Chabane municipality in Limpopo, which has a predominantly African population. The community was chosen because, like many communities in South Africa, it is struggling greatly with the unemployment of recent graduates. The researcher used a qualitative approach and a phenomenological case study research design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the research topic. The population is comprised of unemployed graduates between the ages of 21-35. A non-probability purposive and snowball sampling technique was utilized in the proposed study to select the participants.

Semi-structured in-depth face-to-face individual interviews were used to collect data from the participants. The researcher intended to interview 15 participants, comprising both males and females; however, the sample size was determined by data saturation. A pre-test study was conducted to test the applicability of the research measures to ensure trustworthiness. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was applied to analyze data, and finally, ethical principles were maintained throughout the study. Recommendations were based on the findings of the study.

Keywords: Experiences, Graduates, Higher Education, Unemployment, Collins Chabane, Youth.

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PREFACE

This mini-dissertation is structured in an article format and is divided into three (3) sections. These three sections are Section A, which provides an overview of the study, including the introduction, background of the study, research purpose and objectives, methodology, and ethical considerations. Section B contains two (2) manuscripts, and Section C presents the study's conclusion, limitations, and recommendations based on the research findings. The detailed outline of the mini-dissertation is as follows:

Section A: Mini-Dissertation Overview

Section A presents a comprehensive overview of the study, including background, introduction, problem statement, primary aim and objectives, research design and methodology, as well as ethical considerations.

Section B: Manuscripts

This section contains two manuscripts:

The First manuscript is titled: **Navigating the Gap: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Higher Education Youth Graduates in South Africa and the Neighboring Countries: A Systematic Review**

The Second manuscript is titled: **The Unseen Struggle: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Young Graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality in rural Limpopo.**

Section C: Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations

Section C presents the study conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for this mini-dissertation.

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Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Chart

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SECTION A:

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION and BACKGROUND

1.1. Introduction

This mini-dissertation is a research proposal for a student in the Department of Public Health within the Faculty of Health Sciences of the University of Venda. This study was carried out in the Limpopo province of the Republic of South Africa, at a selected community that falls under the Collins Chabane Municipality. The main purpose of the study was to explore and describe the experiences of higher education youth graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality, in the Vhembe district of the Limpopo province. Although Limpopo is not considered the poorest province, the level of unemployment is extremely high among youth graduates in communities who struggle with deprivation and unemployment. The opinion that led this study in the selected community was influenced by its lack of resources and absence of basic services like water supply (Malima, Kilonzo, & Zuwarinwe, 2022), which is intensified by the unemployment rate, which is at an all-time high, especially amongst higher education youth graduates.

The study describes how unemployment affects the role of young graduates in society. Finally, the study shows the youth's perspective on how unemployment impacts them, which could assist professionals in developing solutions for recent graduates. In the proposed study, the researcher presents the background of the study; theoretical framework; problem statement; significance/rationale of the study; the research setting; research question; the purpose of the study; aim of the study; specific objectives of the study; definition of concepts that are relevant to the study; and the research methodology.

1.2. Background of Study

Governments around the world are genuinely concerned about unemployment as a worldwide concern (Lawrence, Christiano, Martin, Eichenbaum, & Trabandt, 2016). The state of not having a job yet actively seeking one that pays is known as unemployment (Amadeo, 2017). When an economy fails to produce formal, meaningful employment, unemployment follows. This could be the result of little investment, unskilled workers, or workers purposefully quitting their positions to pursue other opportunities. Healthy economies can also experience structural and frictional unemployment, which arises when workers' skills reach an absolute limit or when they willingly quit in search of better opportunities, respectively (Amadeo, 2017).

According to a study by the South African Graduate Employability Research Consortium (SAGERC) in 2021, about one-third of South African graduates are unemployed, and the unemployment rate is particularly high among graduates from historically disadvantaged groups (SAGERC, 2021). Several factors have been identified as contributing to graduate unemployment in South Africa, including 1) A mismatch between the skills and knowledge that graduates acquire in university

and the needs of the job market, 2) The difficulty of finding employment without work experience, especially for recent graduates who may lack the network or contacts needed to find jobs, 3) The ongoing impact of apartheid-era policies that continue to affect the education and employment opportunities of black South Africans (SAGERC, 2021).

1.2.1. The Global Perspective on Graduate Unemployment

A 2020 study by the International Labour Organization (2020) found that 13.6 percent of young people in the labour force, or 67.6 million males and females, are affected by unemployment. At roughly 2.2 and 1.7 times the global rate, respectively, youth graduate unemployment is incredibly high in Northern Africa and the Arab States. Given that youth unemployment rates in Northern Africa and the Arab States have been much higher than those in the rest of the globe since at least 1991, research indicates that there may be structural impediments inhibiting young people from entering the labour market (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018). In 2019, the youth unemployment rate in North America and sub-Saharan Africa was around nine percent, even though both regions had the lowest unemployment rates among all the sub-regions. As a result, helping recent graduates find jobs is generally necessary. It was projected that in 2020 and 2021, the rate of youth unemployment worldwide would increase by 0.1 and 0.1 percentage points, respectively.

Both wealthy and developing nations struggle with youth unemployment, especially among new graduates (Curtain, 2015). According to the International Labour Organisation (2021), youth comprise most of the world's population and are a significant resource for creating a better present and future (Curtain, 2015). They are the most vulnerable category, nonetheless, and are more likely to experience several socioeconomic problems, the most common of which is unemployment (ILO, 2020). India (22.9%), Brazil (13.2%), Spain (30.6%), and the United Kingdom (11.2%) had the highest youth unemployment rates among G20 nations in 2020–2021. At 66.5%, South Africa has the highest rate of youth unemployment (ILO, 2021). Young graduates' unemployment has significantly increased because of China's massification of higher education (Yang, 2018).

1.2.2. Graduate Unemployment in Africa

The African continent is known as the "Dark Continent," with many countries facing significant developmental issues, such as persistent unemployment (African Development Bank, 2014). The large population of young people, accompanied by the inability of economies to create employment, further fuels youth unemployment. High unemployment rates are a result of rapid population growth without corresponding job creation (Lam, 2014). African countries struggle with sufficient job creation to accommodate 10-12 million new entrants into the labour market.

The substantial youth cohort not only creates opportunities for the labour force but also contributes to the unemployment rate. According to Garcia and Fares (2010:6), increasing the size of the youth cohort by 1% leads to a 0.5 percent increase in youth unemployment. The continent is expected to have the world's second-largest population in the next years, following South Asia (Monga, 2013).

1.2.3. Graduate Unemployment in South Africa

South Africa had a rising unemployment rate before the COVID-19 epidemic, which increased throughout the pandemic due to safety measures (Ranchhod & Daniels, 2021). South Africa's official unemployment rate grew by 1.8% in Quarter 2 of 2021, from 32.6% to 34.4%, as reported by Statistics South Africa (2021). In the third quarter of 2018, the unemployment rate in South Africa increased to 27%, according to a Business Tech (2018) research study (Statistics South Africa, 2018). This exceeded the startling increase observed at the beginning of the year, according to statistics released by Statistics South Africa. Since 2003, when unemployment reached the same level, this rate has been the highest. In 2004, it remained 6.1 percentage points lower than the peak recorded since 1994 (Business Tech, 2018). The figures presented above demonstrate that unemployment is a significant concern in South Africa, and they may suggest that the national government is not working hard enough to create enough employment opportunities.

According to Tele (2016), young individuals residing in rural areas of South Africa have greater unemployment rates than their urban counterparts. Many rural youths lack access to critical information and resources required to acquire employment or training opportunities, emphasising geographical location as a significant obstacle to employment. In Limpopo province, rural youth unemployment is 82%, much higher than the urban rate of 58%. Graduates from rural areas are more likely to lose motivation in their job pursuit, owing to the significant costs associated with seeking and applying for employment. These expenses provide extra problems for disadvantaged rural youth, particularly those living in distant locations with minimal infrastructure (Monaisa 2018). Geographical unemployment emerges when workers reside too far away from areas (typically cities) where jobs are likely to be available; young people who live far away are unable to go to such locations. The money they make is insufficient to acquire housing closer to work or pay their daily transport and living expenses (Monaisa, 2018).

1.2.4. Graduate Unemployment in Limpopo Province

Gyeke & Kyei (2011) have concluded that Limpopo province has the highest number of rural people in South Africa, leading to poorer living conditions and higher unemployment rates compared to the national average. According to the Economic Analysis of South Africa (2015), the Western Cape had the smallest gap in the proportions of employed and working-aged people in

2015 (9.3 percentage points), while Limpopo had the highest difference (20.8 percentage points). According to this measure, the working-age population of South Africa's youth in Limpopo might be its most vulnerable cohort (Economic Analysis, 2015). The lack of skills in the labour market is a contributing factor to unemployment nationwide and in the Limpopo province specifically, as some industries demand specialized technical skills (Limpopo Provincial Treasury Report, 2011).

According to Bell & Blanchflower (2010:9), unemployed graduates experience the following effects: a decrease in their ability to find work, which results in a loss of human capital; an increase in their susceptibility to illness, mental stress, and depression; a rise in suicide rates; a reduction in their life expectancy; a rise in the likelihood of poor physical health. The longer one stays jobless, the more difficult it is to obtain work, which makes jobless graduates give up hope and raises the crime rate.

According to the South African Department of Statistics (2019), the less skilled graduates are the most susceptible and feel discouraged from pursuing employment. Many young people are not taught how to be entrepreneurs. They rely on the government to provide them with work. Youth graduates, particularly from rural areas, frequently become distracted from entering the workforce. One of the explanations could be a lack of confidence because of their lack of skills and abilities. They feel excluded from the labour market because they lack the requisite skills and competencies. Young people in rural places have low self-esteem. They are discouraged from entering the labour force because of the lack of necessary skills (Sadika, 2017).

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The following framework guided the study and allowed the researcher to explain the phenomenon of unemployment. The researcher believed the Latent Deprivation Theory (LDT) was most suited for the study's goals. The researcher started by giving the theory's history. Secondly, the rationale for employing the theory was discussed.

1.3.1. Latent Deprivation Theory (LDT)

The Austrian British social psychologist, Marie Jahoda, is mostly to be held accountable for the first piece of study that was published and had a significant impact on later studies on unemployment (Allan, Kim, Liu, & Deemer, 2019). It was initially published in Germany more than 60 years ago, and it is still a crucial basis for a study on the psychological effects of unemployment. In 1930, three-quarters of the families living in Marienthal, a tiny village south of Vienna, had no members who were employed at all (Willemse, 2015). After speaking with every individual in more than 470 families in Marienthal, Jahoda and her colleagues concluded that these people had been experiencing sadness, lack of interest, idleness, family disputes, and a deteriorating sense of time since losing their jobs. The main issue with these observations of the impacts of

Unemployment in Marienthal was whether these effects were due to economic hardship or being unemployed.

The psychological effects of unemployment cannot be assessed in isolation, as unemployment denies individuals access to various benefits typically gained through employment. The idea focuses on the loss of "manifest functions" of employment, such as cash incentives, as well as the number of its "latent functions" (described below). According to this theory, people work primarily for financial gain but also reap the benefits of some latent functions that are linked to and support the growth and maintenance of psychological wellness. The destruction of the five latent benefits of Jahoda's model is related to a degree of psychological distress and anxiety for the unemployed (Aitken, Kaplan, Cannon, & Kim, 2021). The five latent functions of employment are described below:

1.3.1.1. **Time Structure**

Lack of time structure could be detrimental to someone's psychological health. Unemployed graduates possess a lot of free time available to them as a result, which they must learn to use productively. Having a lot of free time can be quite stressful for unemployed individuals, even though it may seem like a luxury to others who are employed and would like to have more free time. When someone is unemployed, they may fall into a harmful pattern: the more they settle into a daily routine, the faster time slips away, and the less likely they are to make plans for the future.

1.3.1.2. **Collective Structure**

According to Jahoda, humans cannot live without what she referred to as "collective purpose," or the sense of being valuable and needed by others. As a result, those who are unable to obtain employment feel a lack of shared purpose. They believe that because they do not value themselves, they are not needed by the society in which they reside. Distressed unemployed graduates may commit suicide, destroy community property, and refuse to take part in any community activities because they do not have a sense of belonging.

1.3.1.3. **Social Contact**

Additionally, employment exposes people to frequent interactions and shared experiences with others outside of the nuclear family, including co-workers, friends, and other members of society. Jahoda claims that a lack of employment causes individuals to engage in fewer social activities and receive less social support from close friends and authority figures, both of which may be detrimental to their psychological well-being. For instance, unemployed graduates can feel ashamed and turn to isolating themselves from their extended relatives and other members of the community.

1.3.1.4. **Status**

The social status of a person within a specific society in which they reside has an impact on the person's sense of self. People tend to perceive themselves similarly to how others do, and having any status at all is preferable to having none at all, which is how unemployed people frequently perceive their condition. As a result, employment helps define one's place in society as well as their identity. Because of their jobs, people feel valued in their families and the community where they live. Their well-being suffers when their employment is terminated because they lose their social status.

1.3.1.5. **Activity**

Jahoda's model identifies the level of activity as the fifth most significant factor influencing an individual's mental health. Employment forces activity, and a lack of structured activity may result in decreased psychological well-being in unemployed graduates. Being active is preferable to being passive for a person's psychological well-being, even if it is due to external circumstances like the necessity to earn a living. Jahoda further claimed that unemployment contributes to psychological suffering because it robs people of intangible benefits (such as time structure, a sense of community, social contact, status, and engagement) that are provided by employment.

As previously mentioned, deprivation of the five latent benefits of employment causes psychological discomfort in unemployed individuals. Since the Latent Deprivation Theory is relevant to this research on unemployment, the researcher decided to incorporate it into the study. It discusses the health effects of unemployment and the advantages of employment. The economic position that emerges from unemployment is documented by Latent Deprivation Theory, along with noteworthy changes in the unemployed's daily activities. It highlights the variety of resources and advantages typically associated with work. These advantages show that employment offers a means of support, entertainment, chances for social connection, opportunity for creativity and mastery, and a sense of direction. It also defines time and serves as a source of identity. The unemployed frequently experience physical and psychological harm when a variety of resources and benefits are not provided.

1.4. **Problem Statement**

Members of the community survive better when they are employed. They tend to experience significantly less stress and are more likely to thrive outside of work, too. It is an undeniable fact that the enormous challenge of graduate unemployment currently challenging South Africa needs to be urgently addressed. According to Mail & Guardian (2020), South Africa is one of the countries with high rates of youth unemployment. They have also observed that the South African economy is deteriorating daily, which may discourage many young people who were hoping to

find work. They may end up involved in illicit activities such as drug misuse (Mail & Guardian, 2020).

There is an increasing number of higher education graduates in South Africa seeking entry into the labour market each year, which presents a significant challenge. While attaining qualifications from higher education institutions is perceived to enhance employment prospects and improve individual lives, many graduates need help to secure their first job post-graduation (Stats SA, 2020). This challenge is particularly pronounced in the Limpopo province, where the unemployment rate among graduates stands at 20.8% (Economic Analysis, 2015). This can, in turn, yield devastating effects such as crime, social exclusion, social instability, and misery (Gyeke & Kyei, 2011). Despite the extensive literature on graduate unemployment in South Africa, more research needs to be conducted, specifically focusing on the Collins Chabane Municipality.

Therefore, this study is focused on exploring and describing the unemployment experiences of higher education graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality, in the Limpopo province. Since there is a limited number of studies focusing on graduate unemployment in the selected community, there is still a lot that needs to be done in terms of research and intervention. This study hopes to contribute to that. Lastly, the study will help curb or solve the problem identified by informing policymakers of potential interventions to bolster job creation and support the labour force in Collins Chabane Municipality.

1.5. Significance of Study

The unemployment of graduates is not a matter that should be ignored, since this has an enormous impact on health and well-being. The results of this study may inspire more extensive, related research initiatives. To help policymakers and planners logically develop interventions aimed at increasing the employment rate among graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality, it is anticipated as well that the study will also contribute to knowledge of the variety of experiences associated with graduate unemployment.

This study on the experiences of unemployed graduates can help educational institutions and policymakers understand the effects of unemployment on graduates. It can assist higher education institutions in strengthening the whole tertiary education system, thereby better equipping graduates with employable skills. Furthermore, the findings may assist policymakers with strategies for implementing measures that support the labour market in creating employment opportunities. Finally, this study may help inform the public about the experiences of unemployed graduates and how they can cope with unemployment.

1.6. Justification of Study

Graduate unemployment in South Africa seems to be rising along with the country's overall unemployment rate, despite the country's growing graduate labour population (Oluwajodu, Blaauw, Greyling, & Ewert, 2015). Although a lot has been published about youth graduate unemployment nationwide, a study of this kind has not been conducted at the Collins Chabane municipality. The denial of employment opportunities to young people might result in their continued social exclusion from work and educational opportunities, keeping them in a cycle of poverty (Mungule, 2016). The analysis of youth unemployment makes it abundantly evident that denying young graduates access to jobs threatens their survival and has a detrimental effect on their quality of life now and in the future.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore and describe the unemployment experiences of unemployed higher education graduates in Collins Chabane municipality, Limpopo province. The results of this study could inspire bigger, related research initiatives to be undertaken. The study is furthermore expected to help policymakers and planners devise rational initiatives to enhance the employment rate among youth graduates in Limpopo province.

1.7. Study Purpose

This study aims to explore and describe the experiences of higher education youth graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality, in the Limpopo province.

1.8. Research Question

What are the experiences of higher education youth graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality?

1.9. Objectives

The following objectives guided the research study:

- o To *explore* the experiences of graduates regarding their unemployment status.
- o To *describe* the experiences of graduates regarding their unemployment status.

1.10. Definition of Terms

1.10.1. Experience

Experiences are events that have a lasting impact on individuals, shaping their meaning and significance (Daher, 2015). In this study, experience means the knowledge and skills that participants have gained through being unemployed for a period in the Collins Chabane municipality.

1.10.2. Graduate

Graduates are those who have earned a bachelor's degree from a higher institution (Moreane, 2016). In this study, graduates are defined as all young individuals who have completed the criteria for a diploma, degree, or master's degree offered by South African universities and institutions.

1.10.3. Higher education

It is a source of highly skilled human labour for the professions as well as general knowledge (Sintayehu, 2018). In this study, higher education refers to education gained from higher institutions of learning, like universities or colleges in South Africa.

1.10.4. Unemployment

It can be referred to as joblessness, which occurs when people are out of work and actively seeking work (Anga'Wandisa, 2020). In this study, unemployment is a state in which graduates who can work are without jobs in the Collins Chabane municipality.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Approach

Through the study of specific people or locations, this study employed a qualitative research methodology that aims to infer meaning from non-numerical data that aids in our understanding of social life through studying targeted populations (Haradhan, 2018). This approach was beneficial since it allowed the researcher to gain a degree of detail from a deep engagement with real-life experiences. This kind of study looks at the world as it is and analyses circumstances to comprehend the meanings people give to their daily lives (Walia, 2015). It tries to help us comprehend the social environment in which we live and the reason why things are the way they are (Haradhan, 2018). Because the researcher is attempting to comprehend social life through the study of a targeted population within the selected community, the qualitative research approach was suitable for this study.

2.2. Research Design

A research design is a comprehensive approach to addressing research questions to offer a suitable structure for a study. It focuses on the kind of study that is intended and the kind of outcomes that might be anticipated from the investigation (Dlamini, 2021). In the proposed study, a phenomenological case study research design was utilized. This approach helps the researcher to address the how and why of a phenomenon while accounting for the influence of its surrounding context. It enables those without a voice to have one (Mzizi, 2017). The role of the case study method in research has become more serious in subjects such as community-based problems like poverty, unemployment, and drug addiction (Mzizi, 2017).

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of unemployed graduates in the selected community, a particular case study design was employed in the study. The researcher employed a single case study because of its modest, straightforward size, which made it simpler to have depth and a complete grasp of the experiences of the unemployed youth of the selected community. This kind of study is utilized to examine regions with little knowledge (Guerrero-Castaneda, Menezes, Ojeda-Vargas, 2017). Based on the above information discussed in this study, it is evident that extraordinarily little research has been conducted on the selected community in Collins Chabane Municipality. Therefore, this research design was much more suitable.

2.3. Study Setting

The study was conducted in a selected community in Collins Chabane municipality, which is situated 9 kilometres North of Malamulele township, Limpopo province. It is a highly traditional, predominantly Xitsonga-speaking community with a total population of 4,133 people and comprises 1,038 households. It is a community in Collins Chabane Municipality that falls under the Vhembe district in the Limpopo province of South Africa. According to the data provided by the Census (2011), the selected community covers an area of 5.28 km². There are more women than men, with 55% of the female population and 45% of the male population. The age differences range from 0 to 85 years old. 99.64% of the population are Black South Africans, 0,15% are White, 0,12% are Indian or Asian, 0.05% are Coloured, and 0,05% are of the other population group. Xitsonga is the most dominant language used in the community, with approximately 98.51% of the community using it as their primary language (Census, 2011).

2.4. Target Population

The target population is the total set of individuals who can provide information for the study (Brink, Van de Walt, & Van Rensburg, 2016). The population targeted for this study consisted of unemployed graduates based in Collins Chabane Municipality. The targeted population also only consisted of individuals aged 21-35. The reason for this choice was that, according to a study by Kwabena & Gyekye (2012), due to Limpopo's highest number of rural South African citizens, it was rational to assume that living circumstances in the province could be more difficult than the national average, which explains the higher unemployment rate. The researcher visited the community and decided to conduct research there after noticing that unemployment is a major challenge, for example, crime is committed to make ends meet. Therefore, this made the population interesting to study and relevant in answering the research question.

2.5. Sampling Method

In the proposed study, the sample was drawn from the research population using a non-probability sampling technique. Purposive and snowball sampling were used in the non-

probability sampling method to get the required sample size. Purposeful sampling is a non-probability sampling strategy where the researcher only chooses participants who, in their opinion, meet the objectives of the study (Obilor, 2023). This sampling technique was well-suited for the study because it focuses on individuals with specific characteristics relevant to the research, ensuring that participants can effectively share their experiences and opinions in a clear, expressive, and reflective manner. Snowball sampling is a method of collecting a study sample by initially engaging one participant, who subsequently aids the researcher in identifying additional individuals within the study population who share similar characteristics. This technique generates the study sample. The snowball sampling technique was utilized until the sample of 15 participants was reached to make certain that the sample size was not too large for the qualitative data collection technique to be administered, but large enough to guarantee trustworthiness with regard to data collection. Nonetheless, it all depended on data saturation.

2.6. Sampling Procedure

A municipal leader from Collins Chabane Municipality was used in the sample selection process for unemployed graduates. The researcher purposely met with the municipal leader to explain the study's objectives and their potential role in identifying young unemployed graduates in the community. The municipal leader then directed the researcher to one of the unemployed graduates. After being made aware of the study's objectives, the unemployed graduate consented to partake in the study, and an interview appointment was agreed upon and scheduled. On the interview day, the researcher started by introducing herself, introducing the study and its purpose, asking for written consent, and then commenced with the in-depth interview. After the interview, the participant was then asked to identify other unemployed graduates he or she knew of in Collins Chabane Municipality who were willing to participate in the study. This process was repeated until the appropriate sample size was reached. Nonetheless, it all depended on data saturation (Naderifar, Goli, Ghaljaei, 2017).

Informed consent was obtained by giving participants a consent form to fill out before they were recruited, explaining the purpose of the study, how the results would be utilized, and who would have access to them. The main objective of obtaining informed consent was to make sure that participants could make an informed decision about whether or not to participate in the study, and this process included providing additional support and information if participants experienced any distress during the study.

2.7. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- Be between the ages of 21-35,

- Unemployed (not less than two years of unemployment),
- A resident of the selected community,
- They must be willing to take part in the study,
- They must be able to give written consent,
- Be able to speak English or Xitsonga, as the collection of data and consent forms was in these languages.
- Be a college or university graduate.

Participants who were excluded from the study possessed the following characteristics:

- Wanted reimbursement or payment for their information,
- Individuals who were only visitors to the selected community,
- Employed

2.8. Data Collection

2.8.1. Data Collection Approach

To collect data, In-depth, individual interviews were utilised. In-depth individual interviews are a qualitative research data collection method in which the researcher records the respondents' oral responses to open-ended questions (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). This strategy was ideal for the study since it allowed the researcher to thoroughly explore the participants' feelings and perspectives on the subject. As a result, the interviews offered detailed background information that helped to influence and refine future research-related enquiries. One benefit of using this interview style is that, with the interviewer there, it is simpler for the subject to clarify any terminology they may not have been able to grasp on their own (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). The interviewer's presence also reduced the amount of "I don't know" responses since the interviewer can probe for more information and get valuable data in this manner. The researcher's presence was also advantageous since it allowed the respondents to ask any queries concerning the questions they were unsure of answering.

Each interview lasted for approximately 35-45 minutes, and the researcher interviewed at least two participants each day until data saturation was reached. The researcher travelled to the participants' homes so they could be more comfortable and at ease in their surroundings. This allowed them to speak more freely and be open about their experiences in more detail. The home language of the participants, Xitsonga, was utilized to conduct the interviews. This was done to accommodate those who did not understand some concepts and allow the participants to speak freely. Furthermore, speaking in their mother tongue allowed them to describe their experiences

in greater detail than they could have if they had used English. As a result, every English-language interview question was converted to Xitsonga. To guarantee conceptual congruence, the researcher translated and transcribed the raw data from Xitsonga to English after the interviews were completed. The researcher had to listen, think, and speak all at once throughout the interview. To help with this, a data collection device was used.

To enable the researcher to fully concentrate on the interview and precisely record the participants' responses, a smartphone was utilized as a digital recorder. With the use of this device, the researcher was able to go back and transcribe the interviews verbatim. Before using this data collection method, participants were asked for their consent. The digital recorder facilitated attentive listening, observing nonverbal clues, and overall increased engagement. It also made it possible for the discussion to proceed without many disruptions.

2.8.2. Data Collection Instrument

An in-depth semi-structured interview schedule explored how participants felt about being unemployed. The schedule contained questions about what their daily lives look like, how they cope with being unemployed, what challenges they face daily due to being unemployed, how it impacts their lives and those around them, what coping mechanisms they use to survive, etc.

A semi-structured, in-depth interview schedule was created to specifically focus on the research objectives. A semi-structured interview schedule consists of preset questions that can be utilised to engage respondents (Ruslin, Mashuri, Sarib, Alhabsyi, & Syam, 2022). These questions serve as a cue for the researcher while also allowing the researcher to probe for more questions to gather further information as the participants respond. The respondent's replies to the first questions shape the subsequent questions, therefore, the researcher was able to probe utilising the participants' responses. The semi-structured, in-depth interview sought to understand the world through the eyes of the participants, revealing the participants' perspectives and lived reality (Makhado, Botma, Greeff, & Mulaudzi, 2022).

Simple language was employed in the interview schedule. The interview schedule featured open-ended questions to prompt participants to provide further information. The schedule began with a brief introduction that covered the researcher, the study's objectives, the ethics of voluntary engagement, concerns regarding confidentiality, access to research findings, informed consent, permission to use a digital recorder, and the length of the interview. The participants benefited from this introduction by being better prepared for the interview, opening up after being assured that their information would be kept private, and understanding their general role during the interview.

The study objectives were covered in three sections of the interview schedule following the introduction. To capture and comprehend the themes, categories, and sub-categories that would emerge from the data for each study purpose, questions that relate to a common objective were grouped. This also encouraged the interviewer to probe for additional information. The interview schedule concluded after the researcher thanked the participants for participating in the study, asked for more information, reassured them that the information they provided would be kept private, and allowed them to express their opinions about the interview before the scheduled interview ended.

2.9. Delimitations of the Study

This study was limited to a specific geographical area, Collins Chabane, in Limpopo province. This helped narrow the study's focus and made it more manageable. The researcher also limited the study to a specific population, graduates, and a specific age group, 21-35, to ensure that the study was relevant to the population being studied. The study was also limited to specific types of data, such as in-depth interviews, to help ensure that the study was based on reliable and relevant data. Finally, the researcher limited the study to a specific concept, such as only studying the experiences of graduates on unemployment. This helped to ensure that the study was focused and concise.

2.10. Pre-test Study

According to Brink et al (2016), pre-testing is a procedure used to confirm that the research instrument can gather data and that its instructions are understandable and clear. For this study, a pre-test was conducted as soon as the interview schedule had been drawn up. A pre-test study enabled preliminary data gathering regarding the phenomenon under investigation. It is a tiny experiment designed to evaluate and collect data before a larger study to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the research (Dzwigol, 2020).

The researcher identified two unemployed higher education graduates from Thohoyandou Thulamela who met the study's selection criteria, and a pre-test was conducted. This was done through recruitment on social media. The pre-test study enabled the researcher to remove any items that did not yield valuable data. Serious faults, which were discovered in the interview questions during the pre-test study, were changed. Conducting a pre-test study allowed the researcher to assess whether the questions were clear and appropriate for the target population. This was conducted to assess the researcher's questioning and probing abilities, along with the duration needed to interview a single participant.

After the pre-test study, the researcher made necessary changes and revisions to the interview schedule and then proceeded to the main phase of data collection. This involved recruiting a larger

sample of unemployed graduates and using the refined interview schedule to gather data on their experiences. The researcher made several revisions before she was satisfied with the interview schedule. The goal was to ensure that it was valid and reliable so that the data collected from the study was of high quality.

3. Data Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Peat, Rodriguez & Smith, 2019) was utilized to analyse data collected during in-depth interviews. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research method that aims to explore the lived experiences of individuals. It involves in-depth interviews or focus groups to understand how people experience and make sense of particular phenomena. It emphasizes the individual's perspectives and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Peat, Rodriguez & Smith, 2019). When doing Interpretative phenomenological analysis, the following 5 steps were followed: 1) Reading the verbatim transcripts multiple times and taking detailed notes on notable and intriguing answers. This is an early interpretation of the researcher's associations. 2) Identifying emerging themes in the early notes and transcript. 3) Grouping the themes that were found into higher-level and clustering categories—the creation of superordinate themes, or those that incorporate more fundamental themes. 4) Creating a summary table that includes the cluster labels and the labels of their subordinate themes (as well as quotes and references to the transcript's pertinent abstracts). 5) Combining cases and arranging them in a table for summary.

A co-coder was used to code the data independently. A work protocol for the co-coder was prepared so that they knew exactly what was expected from them and what they should do. The data collected during the individual in-depth interviews was analysed independently, i.e., the co-coder analysed the data on their own, and the researcher also analysed the data on their own. Once that had been completed, a meeting took place between the co-coder and the researcher to have a consensus discussion regarding the coding themes (co-coding was therefore applied) and ensure that nothing had been missed. This contributed to the trustworthiness of data analysis in qualitative research.

3.1. Plan for Data Management

Research data management (RDM) is defined as “the organization of data, from its entry to the research cycle through to the dissemination and archiving of valuable results” (Whyte & Tedds, 2011). Effective data management enables researchers to collect data in multiple formats and places while ensuring its security. In the proposed study, the researcher protected participants' privacy and confidentiality by preparing the data to reduce the possibility of identifying individual

participants. To ensure this, personal information such as names, addresses, places of birth, and contact information was omitted from the study, and codes were used instead.

Data was transformed into a retrievable form and stored in a secure location, such as a password-protected computer or cloud-based storage service. The researcher ensured that the data was backed up regularly to avoid any loss or corruption; therefore, data was stored in multiple locations (such as a USB stick and in the cloud) to minimize the risk of data loss and deterioration. For control access, the data was only accessible to the researcher and the supervisor. The researcher used an electronic copy to verify the date of data entry, and a numbered hard copy bound in a notebook for record keeping, which made it easier to follow up in case there were any follow-up enquiries. Additionally, a verbatim record was employed for data confirmation and to prove the existence of data in the event of an audit. Data was preserved for likely future use in reanalysing, prioritising, or validating research findings.

4. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness pertains to the degree of confidence in a study's data, interpretation, and methodologies employed to uphold its quality (Polit & Beck, 2014). According to Amankwaa (2016), researchers must specify the protocols and practices required in each study for it to be considered by readers. In the proposed study, the following measures were taken to ensure the respective criteria of trustworthiness:

4.1. Credibility

Credibility is a key element in the study, representing confidence in the validity of the research and its conclusions (Polit & Beck, 2014). To ensure credibility in this proposed study, the researcher ensured trust in the 'truth' of the findings by upholding anonymity, openness, and honesty to ensure the legitimacy of the proposed study. An excellent rapport was built up, and quality time was spent getting to know the study participants before interviewing during the time spent in the selected community to meet with the participants. During the interview phase, participant replies were checked for accuracy and the meaning of their answers, allowing fresh data to emerge up until the point of saturation. This, in turn, enables the researcher to be able to conduct the interviews with ease and analyse the results accurately. Checks for data accuracy were conducted "on the spot" during and after the collection of data.

4.2. Dependability

Dependability is described as the consistency of the data throughout time and under various study conditions. (Polit & Beck, 2014). Unless it is dependable, qualitative research cannot be deemed credible. To ensure credibility in the proposed study, without consulting the initial themes that were established, the researcher continually cross-checked the participants'

responses with those of other participants throughout this procedure to ensure that the responses were coming from participants who were experiencing a comparable setting. As a result, all the findings were comparable, consistent, and completely reported. They were also repeatable, and reliability was established.

4.3. Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which findings may be replicated and are neutral. According to Polit and Beck (2014), this is similar to objectivity in quantitative research. To confirm that the responses were exactly what the participants had said, the researcher carefully recorded the responses as she examined the themes and repeatedly listened to the recordings. When analysing the themes, there was some neutrality because there would be no bias, interest, or favouritism on the part of the researcher. The themes ultimately chosen for analysis matched the participants' statements perfectly; there were no changes or additions. There was an internal agreement between the researcher's interpretations and the actual evidence, and the researcher guaranteed that the data supported the results, conclusions, and recommendations.

4.4. Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts or populations. Unlike other aspects of a study, it is ultimately up to the readers to determine how relevant and applicable the findings are to their specific situations (Polit & Beck, 2014). To ensure the transferability of the research findings, the researcher gave enough thorough and detailed information, enabling readers to comprehend and connect the results and conclusions to their own experiences. More specifically, a thorough study methodology was employed to ascertain the impact of graduate unemployment in the selected community. The researcher provided a dense and detailed description of the research method, data collection, and data analyses to ensure consistency and the ability of other researchers to duplicate the research.

5. Ethical Considerations

5.1. Approval

Before the study took place, approval was obtained from the HCTREC of the Faculty of Health Sciences of the University of Venda. In the selected community, permission was obtained from the tribal authority.

5.2. Voluntary Participation

No participants were forced into taking part in the study. Participants were also permitted to withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardizing their participation in future studies.

Therefore, no pressure was placed on the participants if they wished not to continue with the study.

5.3. **Beneficence – Do not harm**

The possibility of risk to participants was carefully considered, and relevant measures were put in place. Any harm in the form of stress, pain, anxiety, diminishing self-esteem, or an invasion of privacy was avoided as much as possible.

5.4. **Debriefing**

The participants were provided with all the information they needed to fully comprehend the purpose of the study by the researcher. To keep an eye out for any unanticipated negative effects or misconceptions, the researcher talked with the participants about their experiences with the study.

5.5. **Informed consent**

Before recruitment, participants were informed of the study's objectives, the intended use of the results, and the individuals who would have access to them. By completing a consent form before beginning the study, participants were able to make an informed choice about whether or not to engage in the research. This was the primary goal of informed consent. If the participants experienced any kind of distress while participating, further information was also given.

5.6. **Confidentiality**

The information obtained from the participants during the in-depth interviews was published in a way that would not be identifiable as theirs. The data was also used for nothing else but research purposes only. Information collected from the graduates was only accessed by the researcher and the supervisor.

5.7. **Privacy**

In cases where the participants refused to report personal information as they regarded it as an invasion of privacy, the researcher respected their views.

5.8. **Benefits**

The study is said to have more benefits than risks. The community had access to the study's findings after it was completed. The tribal authority was given access to the written report.

5.9. **Deception**

No withholding of information or misleading of participants took place. Participants were not bribed nor coerced into taking part in the study.

5.10. Anonymity

Participants were protected from any undesirable effects of the study. Participants' names were omitted in the publication of research findings. Instead, the participants were labelled numerically, such as 'Participant 1.'

5.11. Respect

As they are doing the researcher the greatest favour by participating in the study, the participants were respected and treated fairly. Their participation was cherished with the highest respect, responsiveness, and attention because, without them, the data for this study would not be available.

5.12. Non-discrimination

Participants did not experience any instances of sexism, racism, gender discrimination, or any other sort of prejudice. Every participant received the same treatment during the interviews.

6. Plan for the Dissemination and Implementation of Results

Research needs to be effectively disseminated and communicated to be adopted and have an impact on society. Governments and stakeholders are alerted to the research findings, enhancing their visibility, comprehension, and application. To disseminate the research findings, the researcher presented at regional and national conferences and published articles in reliable journals. A copy of the research paper was submitted to the University of Venda to ensure accessibility to other researchers and the broader public. This was done to inform policy development aimed at addressing the challenges faced by unemployed youth. The dissertation was intended for publication in peer-reviewed journals to raise awareness about the experiences and challenges faced by unemployed graduates, particularly within affected communities.

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SECTION B:

JOURNAL AUTHOR GUIDELINES AND MANUSCRIPTS

217.1 Journal Author Guidelines

The manuscript was prepared based on “Challenges” guidelines as found in the following link:

<https://www.mdpi.com/journal/challenges/instructions>

Section B: Manuscripts/Articles

Navigating the Gap: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Higher Education Youth Graduates in South Africa and the Neighboring Countries: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Background: Unemployment continues to remain a significant concern in South Africa and African countries. Young graduates face a severe predicament that threatens their social security, the country's long-term economic success, and future potential.

Purpose: This systematic review aims to explore and describe unemployment experiences among higher education graduates living in South Africa and African countries.

Methods: The study yielded 9,904 articles, and five multiple databases were used to conduct the literature search: Google Scholar (6420), Sabinet (1444), Sage (1633), Web of Science (17), and ProQuest (390). The study yielded 14 studies that met the inclusion criteria. The search was limited to publications published between 2014 and 2024 and written in English. Keywords such as experiences, graduates, unemployment, youth, and higher education were used as a consideration and selection criterion.

Results: Five (5) themes were developed from the selected articles in this study regarding the experiences of unemployed youth graduates. Theme 1: Social exclusion (family, friends, community), Theme 2: loss of personal confidence, Theme 3: psychological challenges (worthlessness, identity, stress levels), Theme 4: financial challenges (financial dependency, shame, and embarrassment), Theme 5: nepotism, favouritism, and discrimination.

Conclusion: The results of this study demonstrated that unemployed individuals often experience substantial psychological, financial, and social challenges that demand urgent attention. For example, they may struggle with a loss of social identity and feel shame or embarrassment stemming from their financial reliance on others.

Keywords: Graduate, unemployment, experiences, higher education, youth.

1. Background

Unemployment is one of the most persistent and controversial economic challenges in South Africa and neighboring countries. This circumstance is critical, especially amongst young people, as it threatens the nation's long-term economic growth and development goals and social security. According to a study by Festus et al. (2015), youth comprise a substantial percentage of the unemployed. For instance, Stats SA (2016) states that more than 50% of 15–24-year-olds and more than 29% of 25–34-year-olds had higher rates than adults.

The challenge of graduate unemployment is not unique to South Africa but is also prevalent in other African nations. For instance, in Nigeria, unemployment is intensified by inadequate skills among graduates (Essien & Onukwubiri, 2015). Similarly, Botswana faces significant socio-economic challenges, with university and college graduates being the second and third most affected groups, respectively, with unemployment rates of 13.0% and 6.8% (Statistics Botswana, 2021). This trend has remained steady across multiple surveys conducted in Botswana over recent years (Statistics Botswana, 2016, 2020, 2021).

Various measures, including entrepreneurship, have been used to combat unemployment globally. Among these strategies, education has been a critical tool, as higher levels of education are generally correlated with reduced unemployment rates. Suggestively, the more educated individuals are, the higher their prospects of securing employment. However, despite the general benefits of education, graduate unemployment in South Africa has emerged as a critical concern, progressively increasing over the years (Stats SA, 2015). Many youths in South Africa face numerous labor market challenges presented in complex ways. Festus et al. (2015:3) argue, "*The South African education system is producing a continued stream of insufficiently educated new work seekers.*" This indicates that education has not fully achieved its goal of guaranteeing employability for graduates.

The South African education system has generated graduates who are either in great supply or out of demand in the local market, resulting in a skills gap that affects labor market outcomes. According to statistics from the Manpower Group's Annual Talent Shortage Survey, the percentage of South African businesses reporting challenges in filling open positions due to a lack of suitable skills among job seekers increased from 8% in 2014 to 31%

in 2015 (Manpower Group, 2015). This mismatch highlights a key challenge: while job opportunities exist, many graduates are not employable.

Youth graduate unemployment has severe implications, including mental health conditions, including depression and low self-esteem. New graduates are particularly vulnerable to these problems as they anticipate entering the job market. The rapid evolution of technology further intensifies unemployment by rendering certain skills obsolete, diminishing graduates' human capital and market relevance (Ayhan, 2016). This can lead to emotional and psychological issues such as feelings of isolation, discouragement, and hopelessness (O'Higgins, 2015).

Verhaest et al. (2018) have highlighted another layer of the unemployment crisis: employers' preference for candidates with work experience over fresh graduates, regardless of their qualifications. This bias makes it even harder for new graduates to secure employment, reinforcing the cycle of unemployment. To better understand this complex issue, this systematic review aims to explore and describe the unemployment experiences of higher education youth graduates in South Africa and neighboring countries.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Information Sources and Search Strategy

This systematic review follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) guidelines and is based on African scientific literature. Relevant studies were identified through a comprehensive search across multiple databases, including Sabinet, Sage, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and ProQuest. Studies from each database were extracted using similar sets of keywords. The first set of included keywords related to unemployment was used, e.g., joblessness, stagnation, inactivity, unemployed, redundancy, recession, skill mismatch, downgrading, worklessness, idleness, and loitering.

The second set included keywords related to graduates, higher education, postgraduate, higher learning, university, and tertiary level education. A keyword from the first set and the second set had to be in the title or abstract of the study. The search was limited to publications published between 2014 and 2024, as articles published before 2014 would not reflect or yield the current realities of unemployment experiences within the selected regions. Articles were also written in no other language than English.

2.2. Eligibility Criteria

The studies included in the review met the following selection criteria:

- i. Type of studies included in this review: The unemployment experiences of higher education graduates.
- ii. Unemployed graduates aged 21-35, both males and females.
- iii. Eligible articles must be published in South Africa and African countries such as Nigeria, Botswana, and Zimbabwe.
- iv. Studies were limited to those written and published in the English language.
- v. Published studies must not be more than ten years old (2014 to 2024).

2.2.1. Exclusion Criteria

The systematic review excluded grey literature, studies published in other languages before 2014, studies on participants other than higher education graduates, studies conducted outside of Africa, and studies not focused on unemployment experiences.

2.3. Study Selection

The PRISMA flow diagram was followed in the study selection process to guarantee methodological quality and rigour (Hoffman et al., 2020). Records were identified from the following databases by the researcher: Google Scholar (6420), Sabinet (1444), Sage (1633), Web of Science (17), and ProQuest (390). The abstracts of the online studies were screened, reviewed, and examined. 801 duplicates were removed, and after screening, 8,120 records were removed, and only 983 were assessed for eligibility. The researcher then reviewed all 983 and eliminated 969 studies that did not address the experiences of unemployed graduates. Studies that did not address the experiences of unemployed graduates or focused on other populations above the selected age group, and were not conducted in South Africa or African countries, were eliminated. Articles that did not address the title or were duplicates were eliminated from the study. The remaining 14 papers from the database search were therefore chosen based on their relevance and eligibility criteria, as shown in Figure 1 below.

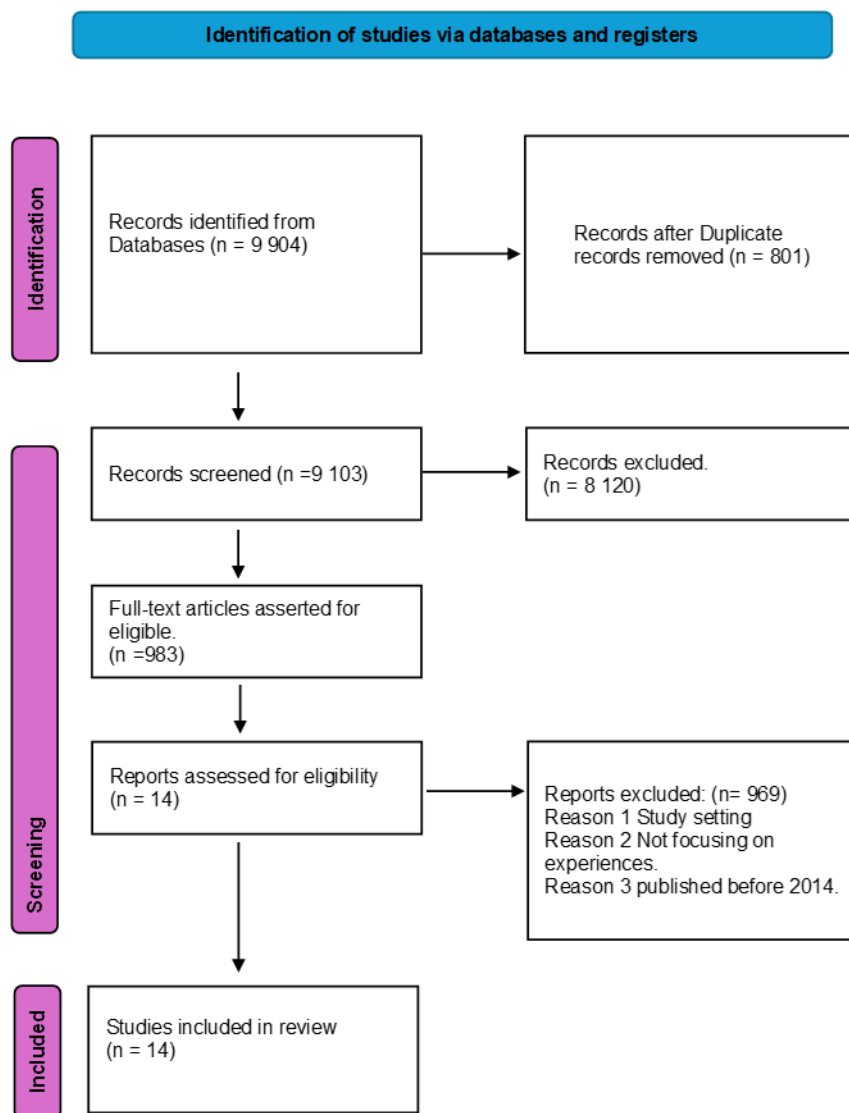


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Chart

2.4. Appraisal of the Included Studies

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool was used to assess all the studies that met the eligibility criteria (www.caps-uk.net). It is a tool that assists in understanding research methodologies, ensuring reliability, and drawing accurate conclusions in specific contexts (Singh, 2013). For this review, a qualitative checklist was utilised to completely and systematically evaluate the articles to guarantee their relevance and reliability. The checklist comprises ten questions, each evaluating a distinct methodological component of a qualitative investigation. This instrument was selected because it is designed as a training resource for researchers with minimal or no formal experience in assessing qualitative research (Long et al., 2020). The table below (Table 1) illustrates the 14 studies evaluated to validate their relevance.

Table 1: Assessment of studies using Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP)

Author, Year	Study Design	CASP Score	%
Gwala et al., 2023	Mixed Methods	9/10	90
Setambule, 2022	Qualitative	8/10	80
Maka et al., 2021	Mixed Methods	7/10	70
Sihna, 2018	Qualitative	8/10	80
Tinashe et al., 2019	Qualitative	8/10	80
Kgotlhane et al., 2021	Qualitative	10/10	100
Oluwajodu et al., 2015	Qualitative	9/10	90
Chauke, 2023	Qualitative	8/10	80
Rinnet van Lill et al., 2022	Qualitative	8/80	80
Ndebele et al., 2019	Qualitative	6/10	60

Rinet van Lill et al., 2021	Qualitative	7/10	70
Graham et al., 2019	Mixed Methods	6/10	60
Mseleku et al., 2022	Qualitative	8/10	80
Matli et al., 2019	Qualitative	7/10	70

2.5. Data Abstraction

The researcher independently compared the collected information to perform data extraction. Data was extracted from 14 studies that fulfilled the inclusion criteria for the systematic review. Eleven studies used a qualitative study design, whilst three studies used a mixed methods design. Details on the setting of the study, design, aim, target population, and published results are included for all studies that satisfy the inclusion criteria. For each study, the country where the study is conducted, descriptive information on the population, sample size, demographic characteristics, declared research objectives, study design, and methods were abstracted to outline the characteristics of all the selected studies. Any feature of the experiences of unemployed graduates is the main result of interest. The following table below (Table 2) summarises the characteristics of the included studies:

Table 2: Characteristics of Included Peer-Reviewed Studies.

Author & Design	Year	Objectives	Setting	Participants Sample size	Studies Key Conclusions
F. N Gwala, R. M Mthethwa & N. N Jili. Mixed Methods	2023	To analyse the factors, effects of, and experiences associated with high graduate unemployment in the eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality.	eThekweni, South Africa	Graduates N=143	Graduate unemployment was associated with psychological challenges, depression, and suicides as a result of socio-economic despair among the affected.
T. Setambule Qualitative Design	2022	To explore graduate young people's lived experiences and the subjective meaning of unemployment.	Botswana	-	Findings show that these unemployed graduate youth are affected psychologically by their plight of being jobless; they are experiencing social exclusion, wrongful accusations, lack of respect by children, as well as delayed adulthood.
L. Maka Mixed Methods	2021	The paper aimed to evaluate agricultural postgraduate students' perceptions of unemployment in South Africa.	South Africa	N = 163	The findings present the top five perceived reasons causing unemployment amongst the educated youth of South Africa. Unemployment on its own can interfere with one's mental health.
Nidhi Sinha Qualitative Design	2018	To examine the individual experiences of unemployed graduates.	South Africa	Unemployed Graduates N=30	The research findings suggest that unemployed graduates are psychologically impacted and sometimes experience feelings of worthlessness, social embarrassment, and high levels of stress. Some individuals also reported a lack of motivation and meaning in their lives.

H. Tinashe & W.T Chinyamurindi Qualitative Design	2019	To investigate the labour market transition and experiences of unemployed graduates within the context of high unemployment in South Africa.	South Africa	Unemployed Graduates N= 30	Graduates require social support during their job search activities. Higher education institutions should cooperate closely with companies to develop and implement internship programmes. Such cooperation may increase employment opportunities for students after graduation.
B. E Kgotlhane, T. J Mudau & D Ncube. Qualitative Design	2018	To explore the challenges faced by unemployed university graduates at a rural university in the Limpopo Province of the Republic of South Africa.	Limpopo, South Africa	Unemployed Graduates N= 6	The unemployed graduates are plagued with socio-economic and physical challenges which are causing untold suffering to them and their families. In addition to economic challenges, the graduates are on the brink of ill health due to stress, depression, and frustration due to unemployment.
F. Oluwajodu D. Blaauw L. Greyling Ewert P.J. Kleynhan Qualitative Design	2015	Explores the perceived causes of graduate unemployment from the perspective of the South African banking sector.	South Africa	Unemployed graduates N=400	Unemployment impacts graduates, although those leaving school early are even more adversely affected.

T.A Chauke	2023	To investigate the lived experiences of TVET college graduates who were unemployed.	South Africa	N =20	This study found that skill gaps and obsolescence due to the TVET college curriculum, skills mismatch, nepotism, and tribalism are other factors determining unemployment among TVET college graduates.
Qualitative Design					
Rinet van Lill & Therese Maria Bakker	2022	To explore how emerging adult graduates perceive unemployment while progressing toward adulthood.	South Africa	N=12	The letdown of unemployment came unexpectedly and caused great disappointment and distress after the investment to complete a higher education qualification. Results from the current study further demonstrate the inability to attain hoped-for adult commitments as a possible contribution to the poor subjective well-being associated with unemployment specific to an emerging adult population.
Qualitative Design					
N. C. Ndebele J. Ndlovu	2019	To understand the unemployment experiences of postgraduate students in KwaZulu Natal.	University of Zululand, South Africa	Postgraduates N=74	Educated graduates may have problems finding employment after graduation because of a mismatch between the labour market requirements and educational qualifications. For graduates to become valuable assets in the labour market, industry, government, and academic institutions should design relevant curricula that would prepare graduates for employment for life instead of jobs for life.
Qualitative design					
Rinet van Lill Terri M Bakker	2021	To explore how young adult graduates experience a sense of significance during unemployment.	South Africa	Unemployed graduates. N=12	The results showed that threads of significance are present throughout the participant's career narratives. The lack of significance during unemployment resulted in great distress and a need to restore significance.
Qualitative Design					

L. Graham, L. Williams & C. Chisoro	2019	To explore the experiences and Barriers to the labour market for unemployed graduates in South Africa.	South Africa	Unemployed graduates N=11	The findings show that lack of relevant work experience, limited information about an efficient job search, low social capital, and high work-seeking costs create job security obstacles.
Mixed Methods					
Z. Mseleku	2021	To explore youth graduate unemployment and unemployment as a South African development problem.	South Africa	Unemployed graduates N= 30	Inadequate skills, lack of work experience, and skills mismatches are among the factors impeding graduates' entry into the labour market. Evidence further indicates that graduates experience numerous challenges in their search for employment, with most struggling to finance their applications.
Qualitative Design					
W. Matli M. Ngoepe	2021	To further explore the life situations and lived experiences of people in South Africa who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET).	South Africa	N=24	The challenges facing young people in South Africa may be captured within the areas of a lack of jobs, financial support, relevant education and training, and guidance and motivation.
Qualitative Design					

2.6. Thematic Analysis of the Selected Studies

The thematic analysis of the included studies in this systematic review employed three levels—descriptive, interpretative, and analytical. At the descriptive level, the analysis focused on categorizing the explicit content from unemployed graduates, highlighting themes such as social exclusion, loss of confidence, psychological and financial challenges, nepotism, discrimination, and favouritism.

Moving to the interpretative level, more profound meanings and patterns were explored. For instance, social exclusion by family members led to exclusion from decision-making and a lack of family support, while loss of confidence resulted in feelings of hopelessness and rejection. Finally, at the analytical level, the synthesis of interpretive themes generated broader implications and new insights, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges unemployed graduates face.

Table 3: Overall Themes and Sub-Themes Emerged from Data Analysis

Themes	Sub-Themes
1.Social Exclusion by Family	• Exclusion in decision-making
	• Unappreciated domestic work
	• Lack of moral family support
Social Exclusion by Friends	• Strained relationships
	• Feelings of isolation
Social Exclusion by Community	• Non-recognition as adults
	• Unmitigated blame & wrongful Accusations
2. Loss of Personal Confidence	• Hopelessness
	• Rejection
3. Psychological Challenges	• Worthlessness

	• Loss of Identity
	• Stress
4. Financial Challenges	• Financial dependency
	• Shame & embarrassment
5. Nepotism, Favouritism, discrimination	• Lack of connections
	• Bribery

3. Results

The following themes were developed from the selected articles included in this study regarding the experiences of unemployed youth graduates: Social exclusion (family, friends, community), loss of personal confidence, psychological impact (worthlessness, identity, stress levels), financial impact (financial dependency, shame, and embarrassment), nepotism, favouritism, and discrimination.

3.1. Social Exclusion by Family

3.1.1. Exclusion in Decision-Making

Unemployed graduates feel excluded from family decision-making due to their lack of employment status. They are deliberately excluded from family meetings, where critical decisions are made. The common consensus is that only employees were permitted to speak in meetings. Their opinions are not taken into consideration (Setambule, 2022). Exclusion from family matters due to unemployment creates a sense of shame, depression, and resentment that can take a toll on mental health and relationships with family members.

3.1.2. Unappreciation of Domestic Work

Despite the terrible experiences within their families, some unemployed graduates realise the need to be helpful by undertaking various household housekeeping chores. However, their efforts are not well appreciated or even recognised in this respect. They often feel undervalued for their domestic contributions due to a lack of assistance, gratitude, and acknowledgement

(Setambule, 2022). The lack of appreciation and acknowledgement can make their efforts feel futile and invisible, which can cause demoralization and belittlement.

3.1.3. Lack of Family Moral Support

Unemployment can lead to sadness and stress-related health issues, including migraines and heart disease (Cloete, 2015). As a result, job seekers and unemployed individuals require supportive surroundings, particularly from their families (Cloete, 2015). However, several unemployed graduates are dissatisfied with the lack of help from close family members, including those with the "right" connections. Some working family members are viewed as resentful and afraid of losing their monopoly on "success" by encouraging and supporting their younger relatives' job-seeking attempts (Setambule, 2022).

3.2. Social Exclusion by Friends

Unemployed graduates, particularly young women, often struggle to attend and contribute to family and friend milestones due to financial constraints. Contributing to extraordinary events like baby showers, bride showers, and birthday parties is an important milestone. They expressed concern that this can lead to strained relationships and feelings of isolation. Social isolation can make them feel even more lonely and ostracised, reinforcing their feelings of worthlessness and depression. They also experience discrimination and loss of power with friends; they are looked down upon and not taken seriously because they do not work (Setambule, 2022). The pressure to keep up with the financial demands of social events can be overwhelming and lead to feelings of shame and inadequacy.

3.3. Social Exclusion by Community

According to Du Toit et al. (2018), being economically active, independent, and contributing to societal needs is how people in a variety of socioeconomic and cultural contexts gain the respect of their community. Many young unemployed graduates reported social marginalisation due to societal expectations, including name-calling, humiliating, baseless charges, and suspicion of ulterior motives.

3.3.1. Non-Recognition as Adults

According to a study by Strachan (2015), adulthood requires employment or financial independence to meet economic demands in many African contexts. Status, respect, marriage,

social recognition, and participation in the family and/or community are all influenced by one's career. Unemployed youth are not regarded as adults by society, although having surpassed childhood, due to their lack of financial independence and societal involvement. For instance, "youthman" in West Africa, regardless of age, designates someone who has not attained social adulthood (Honwana, 2014). This may lead to ostracism, as communities tend to value and take pride in those who are employed. On the other hand, their younger counterparts appear to be regularly appreciated and respected by community elders.

3.3.2. Unmitigated Blame and False Accusations

Unmitigated blame refers to circumstances in which young people without employment are blamed and held responsible for part of the events that affect their families or communities (Setambule, 2022). Youth without jobs depend on others for financial support; they are also subjected to various criticisms and suspected intentions that ultimately breed total mistrust. For example, when something goes missing from their homes, they are frequently the first to be suspected. Unemployed individuals are frequently viewed with suspicion, particularly when seen socializing in groups, as they are often assumed to be involved in criminal activities. Young women, in turn, are commonly accused of infidelity or having affairs with married men. The stigmatization faced by unemployed graduates is a clear example of unmitigated blame. When a societal crisis like teenage pregnancy arises, unemployed youth often become targets of public frustration. (Setambule, 2022).

3.4. Psychological Challenges

3.4.1. Worthlessness

Due to unemployment, youth graduates frequently compare themselves to their successful counterparts and feel worthless and unqualified due to their lack of employment. This negatively impacts their mental health as their standard of living is lower than that of their employed peers. According to a study by Ncube et al. (2018), graduates reported feelings of hopelessness, dejection, and wanting to give up on life after unsuccessful job applications and interviews. Feelings of shame, embarrassment, and suicidal thoughts are also experienced due to a lack of income (Sinha, 2018). Furthermore, increased hostility, depression, anxiety, decreased self-esteem, loneliness, alcohol, and drug abuse are also experienced due to unemployment (Ncube et al., 2018). According to the World Health Organisation (2021),

suicides were reported to be highest among the 15 to 29-year-old group, and this corresponded with the groups most susceptible to graduate unemployment (Graham et al., 2016).

3.4.2. Loss of Identity

According to Sinha (2018), unemployment provides more than just financial stability; it also provides a sense of identity in one's life. Unemployed graduates can experience a loss of identity, as it is often difficult for individuals to define themselves outside of their academic achievements. Graduates usually envision a particular trajectory for their lives, which includes securing a job after completing a higher education qualification. When unemployment disrupts this plan, it can create a feeling of being "off-track" or "lost," leading to a loss of identity. The loss of identity associated with graduate unemployment is often tied to the disconnect between the graduate's expectations for their future and the reality of their situation. It can be a challenging adjustment period as graduates reassess their goals and redefine their sense of self, considering their circumstances (Sinha, 2018).

3.4.3. Increased Stress

The uncertainty surrounding the future and financial stability can cause high levels of anxiety and stress. These feelings may be intensified by the societal pressure to succeed and achieve independence as an individual. There is often societal pressure to find a job soon after graduation. This pressure can result from family members, friends, and society. The constant questioning about one's job search and plans can lead to stress and feelings of inadequacy. Unemployment creates uncertainty about the future; graduates worry about when they will be employed, how they will progress in their careers, and whether they will achieve their long-term goals. The societal pressure to succeed after graduation, coupled with the uncertainty of being unemployed, can create anxiety, stress, and self-doubt (Sinha, 2018).

3.5. Financial Challenges

3.5.1. Financial Dependency

The connection between graduate unemployment and financial dependency is that unemployment often leads to a lack of economic independence. Without a steady income, graduates may rely on others for financial support. This can lead to frustration, helplessness,

and a lack of self-sufficiency. Moreover, prolonged financial dependency could create tension in personal relationships, particularly if the individual feels like a burden on their family or society. It can also delay the transition to adulthood, as financial independence is often seen as a key aspect of becoming a fully-fledged adult. It can also lead to disappointment, frustration, and a sense of failure (Sinha, 2018).

3.5.2. Shame and Embarrassment

Unemployed graduates may feel like a burden on their families or society if they need to rely on others for financial support. This can lead to guilt and a sense of not contributing to society. Financial dependency can create a sense of loss of autonomy, as graduates may need to ask for permission or approval for their financial decisions. This can contribute to feelings of helplessness and a lack of control. Financial dependency can limit the options available to unemployed graduates, including their ability to invest in personal development, pursue new opportunities, or engage in social activities. This can contribute to frustration and a sense of stagnation (Sinha, 2018).

3.6. Loss of Personal Confidence

According to a study conducted by Gwala et al. (2023), the findings reported that unemployed graduates tended to be very hopeless compared to the views that they had better chances of getting a job than the rest of society, and that graduate unemployment was not as long-lasting as youth unemployment. These findings correspond well with arguments by Mutambara et al. (2018) and Mhazo et al. (2021). Prolonged job searches can lead to a series of rejections, eroding self-confidence (Gwala et al., 2018). Graduates may begin to doubt their abilities and question their skills and qualifications. Societal pressure to find a job after graduation can create a sense of failure if one cannot secure employment. This can further lead to a decrease in self-confidence as well. The feelings of hopelessness and self-doubt that can arise from a series of rejections and a lack of job opportunities can be incredibly damaging to a graduate's sense of self-worth.

3.7. Nepotism, Favouritism, and Discrimination

Research indicates that graduates are less likely to experience nepotism, prejudice, or favouritism (Mseleku, 2022). According to Kim and Scott (2018), graduates who meet job qualifications may face discrimination from employers. According to a study conducted by

Chauke (2023), many graduates revealed that they face discrimination in terms of employment opportunities in the Vhembe district based on where they studied, who they know, and where they originate from.

Nepotism and favouritism weaken equality in the labour market. Instead of being hired based on qualifications, graduates may miss opportunities if they lack the necessary connections or personal qualities. Individuals without influential relatives face challenges in securing jobs. Furthermore, hiring managers and other hiring authorities favour their relatives over those who have the necessary abilities for the job (Chauke, 2023). According to Mseleku (2022), nepotism is a significant factor contributing to graduate unemployment. Some graduates face discrimination based on their colour, gender, and age. Furthermore, favouritism is recognised as a factor contributing to graduate unemployment (Terrance, 2023).

4. Discussion

This systematic review focused on the experiences of unemployed higher education graduates in South Africa and African countries. Five themes emerged from 14 studies: social exclusion by family, friends, and community; psychological challenges (worthlessness, loss of identity, and increased stress levels); financial challenges (financial dependency, shame, and embarrassment); loss of personal confidence; and nepotism, favouritism, and discrimination. Most of the identified articles revealed a strong psychological impact of unemployment. The study suggests that unemployment might lead to negative self-beliefs, including a lack of social connections, Identity, worthlessness, and powerlessness. Unemployment was also identified as a potential stressor, resulting in elevated stress levels.

It is, therefore, evident that the study's results demonstrate that the effects of unemployment should not be underestimated, particularly regarding the psychological health of the unemployed. This review also suggests that unemployment can have a profound social impact on unemployed individuals, especially regarding social comparison. Many individuals tend to experience heightened scrutiny from society, which places them under considerable psychological pressure. They also tend to compare their situation within and outside the family, adding to their distress. This observation aligns with previous studies on unemployment (e.g. Sidorchuk et al., 2017) that also noted the impact of social comparison on

unemployed individuals' psychological health. Graduates reported that social comparison has intensified, and they feel they are constantly scrutinized according to societal standards.

The findings indicate that unemployment among graduates triggers more negative emotions than positive ones. Additionally, the results highlight the psychological impact of being jobless on young graduates, who experience social exclusion, wrongful accusations, diminished respect from family, friends, and the community, as well as delayed transitions into adulthood. According to previous research, failing to meet hoped-for obligations might negatively impact well-being (Cockshott et al., 2018; Sharon, 2016). Participants expressed feelings of hopelessness, dissatisfaction, and uselessness. The unanticipated jobless setback resulted in significant disappointment and distress following the investment to complete a higher education qualification.

The studies further revealed that unemployment can lead to a loss of social identity for unemployed graduates. People's feelings of self-worth depend on their social identity, which gives them a sense of purpose, dignity, and belonging. Nevertheless, unemployment can undermine these qualities, resulting in emotions of worthlessness, insecurity, humiliation, and shame (Ibañez & Lopez, 2018). This is because unemployed individuals often have limited economic power, which restricts their involvement in social and familial activities. As a result, they may begin to isolate themselves or feel alienated from others, further diminishing their sense of belonging. This can further cause feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, as graduates may begin to compare themselves unfavourably to their employed peers. This can lead to jealousy, frustration, and even resentment towards others, furthering their disconnection and isolation.

Furthermore, unemployment might lead to decreased communication with friends due to the difficulty of maintaining friendships when people are no longer on the same level or share common hobbies or groups (Kitiashvili & Sumbadze, 2019). Relating to peers in social settings may often be difficult, as conversations often revolve around work and career achievements. Unemployment can cause a sense of alienation from society due to both the lack of economic power and the stigma associated with being unemployed. Most societies see work as a fundamental part of being human. According to Cloete (2015), employment elevates an individual's social status, establishes them as adults, and automatically benefits their family

or community. Employment provides individuals with access to numerous social groups, which are intricately linked to their social identity.

The results of this study also display how discrimination contributes to the high unemployment rate among higher education graduates. This is driven by the perception among businesses that graduates lack the essential skills required for employment. This bias contributes to the vicious cycle of unemployment, as the longer a graduate stays unemployed, the more likely they are to be discriminated against. Extending these results, a wider range of factors, including nepotism and discrimination, were found to influence the unemployment of higher education graduates. Graduates have difficulty finding acceptable employment due to the high level of nepotism in their community. In addition, people without family in strategic or hiring roles nevertheless bear the same unemployment cost as people with related families. The results of this study are consistent with those of Yasin et al. (2019), who contended that affluent families can readily impact the recruitment procedure when their graduates seek employment in the public sector.

Given the significant economic and social challenges faced by unemployed graduates in this study, discrimination and loss of power were the primary socio-economic issues they encountered daily. The analysis revealed that most unemployed graduates have financial difficulties due to a lack of income. Many unemployed graduates rely on their parents for financial support, while some resort to theft.

5. Recommendations

Organisations and higher education institutions should collaborate to make certain that graduates have access to a diverse selection of courses that will make them employable. Career guidance should ensure that it is produced to match the regular recruitment efforts, aim to bridge the gap between graduates and potential employers, and meet labour market demands. This will assist in reducing qualification mismatches. Students and graduates should be educated on the advantages of vocational employment, which can lead to better job opportunities.

Higher education institutions should prioritise work-integrated learning rather than relying on limited internship opportunities. Project-based learning, work simulations, volunteer

community activities, and field studies can improve universities' ability to teach employment skills to a greater number of graduates.

They should also provide psychological support to graduates to mitigate the negative impacts of long-term unemployment. Employers should provide graduates with work-based learning opportunities to help them build general skills and job-related expertise. Lack of work experience among graduates is one of the main obstacles to entering the labour market. Therefore, governments should cooperate with private sectors and civil society organisations to provide graduates with more work experience. Lastly, programmes for graduate employment should be extensively publicised and more inclusive of all races, institutions, and genders than they are now.

6. Conclusion

This study explored and described the lived experiences of unemployed youth graduates from South Africa and other African countries. The results indicate that being an unemployed graduate triggers more negative feelings than positive ones. Furthermore, unemployed graduates experience severe psychological impacts such as social exclusion, false accusations, a loss of respect from family, friends, and the community, as well as delayed adulthood. This study adds to the existing body of literature on emerging adults by highlighting the effects of unemployment on the ability to fulfil expected adult responsibilities.

It also emphasises the stagnation encountered by graduates who have put significant time and effort into their education but experienced structural barriers in the labour market that hindered their employment prospects. The disappointment and distress stemming from unemployment are particularly acute given the investment in higher education. While more effective interventions are required to reduce graduate unemployment, further research is essential to help emerging adults explore alternative pathways to achieving adult status.

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217.2 Journal Author Guidelines

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"The Unseen Struggle: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Young Graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality in rural Limpopo."

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Abstract

Background: In comparison to older members of the labor force, graduating youths face an increasingly high rate of unemployment worldwide. Since the global financial crisis, there has been an increase in unemployment among youth graduates. In South Africa, youth unemployment is increasing, leading to social, economic, and political challenges.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the unemployment experiences of unemployed graduates in Collins Chabane municipality, Limpopo province.

Methods: A qualitative phenomenological case study research design was employed, by utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather data from unemployed graduates. An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was employed to identify key themes and patterns in the data, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the experiences of the graduates.

Results: The study identified five (5) themes from the analyzed data, namely: psychological and emotional impact, relationships with families and friends, financial challenges, impact on romantic relationships, and community perception.

Conclusion: The key findings show that unemployment has far-reaching implications for individuals, affecting them financially, psychologically, socially, and relationally.

Keywords: Unemployment, Graduates, Experiences, Youth, Limpopo

1. Background

The rise in graduate unemployment has become a prevalent concern in today's global economy, challenging many economies worldwide, including those of developed nations (Oppong & Sachs, 2015). Although this issue is prevalent globally, it is particularly pronounced in developing regions, with Africa and South Africa facing significant hurdles in integrating graduates into the labour market. Graduate unemployment in these regions has become critical, impeding economic growth and sustainable development.

Balogun (2016) highlights that nearly half of the 10 million graduates produced annually by over 668 African universities remain unemployed, underscoring the gravity of this issue. This widespread unemployment has hindered numerous African countries from achieving their economic potential, resulting in economies characterized by jobless growth. Graduate unemployment thus represents a substantial developmental challenge, affecting not only individual livelihoods but also the broader economic aspirations of the African continent.

South Africa faces a serious challenge with the rising number of unemployed graduates, threatening the country's economic and social stability. Without effective intervention through deliberate and targeted government policies, this issue may continue to erode national cohesion and limit economic progress. Other countries, such as South Korea, Thailand, Israel, and Brazil, have successfully addressed similar issues by implementing bold policies to create employment opportunities for young, skilled graduates, providing a potential model for South Africa to follow (Longe, 2017).

Youth unemployment in South Africa is exceptionally high among those aged 15 to 34, with recent statistics indicating a troubling 66.5% unemployment rate among this age group (Stats SA, 2022c). This represents one of the highest youth unemployment rates globally and presents a substantial barrier to sustainable economic growth and social development. When most young people lack access to employment, societies and economies struggle to thrive.

Several factors exacerbate youth and graduate unemployment in South Africa, including a mismatch between skills and labour market demands, insufficient work experience, and high corruption and nepotism in employment practices (Ntshiza, 2018). These factors create systemic barriers that prevent many qualified young individuals from securing meaningful work. Despite the significance of this issue, research on graduate unemployment remains

limited in South Africa, a surprising gap given its implications for the nation's future economic and social well-being.

Addressing youth unemployment through targeted employment opportunities is essential to reducing South Africa's high unemployment rate, particularly among young people. Increasing job prospects for the youth could significantly alleviate associated social issues, including crime, poverty, and inequality within communities. Economic deprivation, driven by limited job availability, often leads to frustration among those with restricted access to material success, which can encourage criminal behaviours (Mazorodze, 2020).

Recent data reflects the severity of South Africa's unemployment crisis. In the second quarter of 2022, the national unemployment rate reached 33.9%, with the number of unemployed individuals rising by 132,000 to 7.994 million (Stats SA, 2022b). Youth unemployment remains particularly alarming; while the rate for job seekers aged 15 to 24 decreased slightly to 63.9% in the first quarter of 2022, it remains among the highest globally (Stats SA, 2022a). Considering these statistics, this study sought to explore the experiences of unemployed graduates in Limpopo province.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological case study research design to explore unemployment experiences among youth graduates in Collins Chabane municipality, Limpopo province. Since it examines people's experiences in daily life, this study design was chosen. It is employed when researching the experiences of one or more people with an idea or phenomenon. The use of a phenomenological research design allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges of unemployed graduates, since the study is about the life experiences experienced by the unemployed community members. This type of research is used to study areas in which there is little knowledge (Guerrero-Castañeda et al., 2017).

Based on the above information that was discussed in this study, it is evident that extraordinarily little research has been conducted in the Collins Chabane municipality; therefore, this research design was much more suitable. The phenomenological approach

captured the subjective meaning and personal insights of participants. Conducting the study in a familiar, natural setting allowed the participants to engage openly and authentically, fostering an environment that encouraged in-depth, detailed accounts of their experiences. This study enabled a thorough understanding of the social, emotional, and economic aspects of graduate unemployment.

2.2. Setting

The study was conducted within a selected community of Collins Chabane municipality, located in Malamulele township in the Limpopo province. The researcher realized that despite their qualifications, many graduates in the selected community face the challenge of securing employment. They have skills and experience gaps and structural barriers, causing a lack of access to resources due to financial constraints. The reason for choosing this study setting is because of the high unemployment rate in the Limpopo province, which stands at 20.8 percent (Economic Analysis, 2015).

There are limited research studies that specifically focus on the Collins Chabane municipality on graduate unemployment, with a specific focus on the experiences of unemployed graduates and challenges they encounter in attempting to enter the labour market. This makes the setting interesting to study and relevant in answering the research question. Lack of research into this problem leads to a lack of understanding of the nature of the problem; therefore, this study attempts to bridge this gap in knowledge, focusing specifically on Collins Chabane municipality, Limpopo.

2.3. Study Population and Sampling Strategy

The population in this context refers to all the unemployed graduates in a selected community in Collins Chabane municipality and includes both males and females between the ages of 21 and 35. Fifteen (15) participants were included in the study. The reason for this choice was that, according to a study by Kwabena & Gyekye (2012), Limpopo has the largest percentage of rural residents in South Africa, so it was reasonable to assume that the living circumstances there are worse than they are nationwide, which indicated a higher unemployment rate. According to the MFMA (2020-21) Consolidated general report on local government audit outcomes, Collins Chabane Municipality has an unemployment rate of 36.7 percent. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to reach the desired sample. This sampling

method was chosen because it was challenging to find unemployed graduates who wanted to participate in the study; therefore, participants were asked to make relevant referrals to other unemployed graduates they knew of. The snowball sampling technique was utilized until the sample of 15 participants was reached to make certain that the sample size was not too large for the qualitative data collection technique to be administered, but large enough to guarantee trustworthiness.

2.4. Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews at the comfort of the participants' home to explore their experiences regarding unemployment in their natural setting. This method of data collection was chosen because of its primary nature to establish and understand the problem at hand more thoroughly. It assists in understanding the experiences of unemployed graduates and grants the opportunity to gain insights into the themes of graduate unemployment. An interview guide was prepared beforehand. It allowed the researcher to conduct interviews and avoid interrogation of the graduates, which was helpful in having meaningful engagement.

Interview questions were written in English and translated into Xitsonga. The interviews were approximately 40-45 minutes long. When the interviews had been completed, the researcher then translated and transcribed the unprocessed Xitsonga data into English to guarantee conceptual equivalency. A smartphone was utilized as a digital recorder to record, allowing the researcher to focus on the interview and accurately record what was being said. After the interview process had been completed, the researcher was then able to listen to the interviews on the recorder and transcribe them verbatim. First, permission was asked from the participants to use this method of data capturing to ensure consent. Additionally, audio recording made it possible for information to flow freely and uninterrupted.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data was analysed using the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The researcher went back to the data, focusing on the responses' meanings and applying the five steps of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. 1) Reading and re-reading the verbatim transcripts several times and making descriptive notes of interesting and significant responses. This is a record of the researcher's associations (an early interpretation). 2) Identification of emergent

themes from the transcript and early notes. 3) Organizing the identified themes into those that cluster together and those that are at a higher level - Establishment of superordinate themes (those that incorporate more primary themes). 4) Drawing a summary table comprising the cluster labels together with their subordinate theme labels (and quotations and references to where the relevant abstracts may be found in the transcript). 5) Integrating cases and presenting them in a summary table. The data was transcribed verbatim, read, and re-read to get the exact meaning of the participant's responses. Five main themes and fifteen additional sub-themes emerged. By interpreting it with a deeper meaning, the researcher was able to elicit the significance of the experiences of unemployed graduates (Peat, Rodriguez & Smith, 2019:35).

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration was approved under the committee of the HCTREC of the Faculty of Health Sciences of the University of Venda (Ethical Clearance No. FHS/24/PH/18/0708, date of approval: August 2024). Thus, ethical principles were upheld throughout the study, ensuring participant confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Written informed consent was obtained from the study participants after the researcher read the information sheet aloud and explained the purpose of the study. The study obtained permission from the appropriate institutional review boards or ethics committees and complied with ethical standards.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Characteristics of Unemployed Youth Graduates

The researcher intended to interview fifteen (15) participants; however, data saturation was reached after 10 participants, who included five (5) males and five (5) females from a selected community in Collins Chabane Municipality. These participants were chosen using the purposive snowball sampling method. The eligible participants were interviewed until saturation was reached. Table 1 summarises the biographical details of the total of 10 participants interviewed individually using semi-structured in-depth individual interviews.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Unemployed Graduates:

Participant	Age	Gender	Qualification Obtained	No. of Years since Graduation	Higher Education Institution
Unemployed Graduate 1	28	Female	Bachelor of Finance	4 Years	University of Johannesburg
Unemployed Graduate 2	24	Female	Dip in Office Administration	2 Years	South-West Gauteng College
Unemployed Graduate 3	29	Male	BA Media Studies	4 Years	University of Limpopo
Unemployed Graduate 4	26	Female	Bachelor of Social Sciences in Psychology	3 Years	North-West University
Unemployed Graduate 5	26	Female	Bachelor of Education	4 years	University of Limpopo
Unemployed Graduate 6	27	Male	Bachelor of Social Sciences in Sociology	3 Years	North-West University
Unemployed Graduate 7	25	Male	Dip in Environmental Sciences	2 Years	Tshwane University of Technology
Unemployed Graduate 8	30 years	Female	Bachelor of Human Resource Management	6 Years	North-West University
Unemployed Graduate 9	28	Male	Dip in Electrical Engineering	4 Years	Tzaneen TVET College
Unemployed Graduate 10	31	Male	BA Honours in Criminology	8 Years	University of Limpopo

3.2. Profile of Unemployed Youth Graduates

The interviewed participants were comprised of 10 unemployed youth graduates. Among the unemployed graduate youths, 5 were females and 5 were males. The ages of graduate youths ranged from 24-35 years. According to Stats SA (2015), people in this age group are highly affected by the unemployment rate in the country. Therefore, the study captured a relevant age group for the research question. With regards to their education, six (6) of the unemployed graduate youths had bachelor's degrees, three (3) had diplomas, and one (1) Honours. With regards to their occupations, none of the graduate youths are employed. The years since graduation for the graduates range from 2-8 years. The tertiary institutions that the graduates attended are the University of Johannesburg, South-West Gauteng College, University of Limpopo, North-West University, Tshwane University of Technology, and Tzaneen TVET College. These demographic characteristics of the participants will help us understand the nature of unemployment among youth graduates later in this study.

3.3. Presentation of Findings

Five (5) themes were identified from the analysed data, namely: psychological and emotional impact, relationships with families and friends, financial challenges, impact on romantic relationships, and community perception. The presentation of data is done according to each theme and is discussed separately. The following table (2) presents the outline of the themes and sub-themes.

Table 2: Main themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-theme(s)
2.1 Psychological and Emotional Impact	▪ Anxiety and Depression ▪ Loss of Self-Worth ▪ Suicidal Thoughts
2.2 Relationship with Family and Friends	▪ Supportive Family ▪ Distant Friends ▪ Social Isolation
2.3 Financial Challenges	▪ Financial Dependence ▪ Limited Opportunities for Further Studies

	▪ Inability to Meet Basic Needs
2.4 Impact on Romantic Relationships	▪ Financial Dependency ▪ Emotional Strain ▪ Partner Support
2.5 Community Perception	▪ Judgment by the Community ▪ Loss of Respect ▪ Exclusion from Community Activities

Theme 1: Psychological and Emotional Impact

The theme of psychological and emotional impact reflects the tremendous mental and emotional challenges faced by the participants, with three distinct sub-themes emerging from their experiences: anxiety and depression, loss of self-worth, and suicidal thoughts. Many feel isolated and unsupported.

Subtheme 1.1: Anxiety and Depression

Participants frequently mentioned feelings of hopelessness and anxiety, especially after facing repeated rejections in job applications. This recurring pattern highlights the deep impact on their mental health, with each rejection feeling like confirmation of their own perceived inadequacies. Participant 10 expressed,

"I've struggled with anxiety and depression. There are days when it feels like I am carrying the weight of my failures" (Participant 10, male).

"One day, you're hopeful because you've just sent out a few applications, and the next, you're back in despair because you've heard nothing back" (participant 10, male).

Subtheme 1.2: Loss of Self-Worth

Unemployment has led to a significant decline in participants' self-esteem. Unemployment has led to a significant decline in participants' self-esteem. The fear of being asked about their job status is a common concern among unemployed individuals, who often avoid social interactions to escape awkward conversations or judgments. Participant 2 shared,

"My self-esteem is being affected because I always isolate myself... I avoid being asked questions about my current situation" (Participant 2).

Subtheme 1.3: Suicidal Thoughts

Suicidal ideation emerged as a coping mechanism for some participants, who struggled to see a future without employment. Prolonged unemployment increases the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviours, particularly among individuals who struggle to cope with feelings of uselessness and hopelessness. They verbalised this in this manner:

"I feel like it's better if I take my life, but I try to pray about those things" (Participant 1, female).

"I sometimes have suicidal thoughts because I feel useless" (Participant 2, female).

"I do have suicidal thoughts, questioning if it's even worth living another day" (Participant 3, male).

Theme 2: Relationships with Family and Friends

Participants reported in diverse ways that unemployment affects relationships with family and friends, creating supportive and strained dynamics. While families tend to be supportive, friends may distance themselves due to different life circumstances. Three subthemes resulted from this theme: supportive family, losing friendships due to unemployment, and social isolation.

Sub-Theme 2.1: Supportive Family

Many participants were thankful for the emotional and financial support they received from their families. However, some participants still felt like they were burdening their families. Numerous participants expressed appreciation to their family members for their financial and emotional support, which helped them hold onto hope even during persistent difficulties. This was highlighted in this manner:

"I do have the support of my mother and grandmother. They always encourage me not to lose hope." (Participant 1).

"My family tries by all means to accommodate me, although I sometimes feel like a burden." (Participant 2).

"They try their best to support me emotionally and help me look for jobs." (Participant 3)

Sub-Theme 2.2: Loss of friendships due to unemployment

Friendships often change due to unemployment, with some friends growing distant as their life trajectories diverge. Participants expressed feelings disconnected from their friends and

were unable to maintain the same lifestyle as their employed peers. They also reported a pattern of self-isolation, stating that they withdrew due to their inability to match the standard of living of their peers. Furthermore, they revealed feeling abandoned and not cared for. This was emphasized in this manner:

"I lost many friends because they feel like they're on a different level compared to me."

(Participant 1)

"I isolate myself because I cannot match my friends' standard of living." (Participant 2)

"Some of my friends have families and jobs now, so they don't have time for me."

(Participant 3)

Sub-Theme 2.3: Social Isolation

Participants often feel left out in social and community settings, which leads to increased isolation. Participants stated fear of rejection and judgment, which keeps them from fully participating in social settings. Participants noted that even when attending community gatherings, they remain silent due to the fear of being rejected because of their unemployment status. This was expressed in the following manner:

"Even if I attend community events, I don't say anything because I fear rejection"

(Participant 1, female)

"I avoid being around people because they judge me for being unemployed" (Participant 2, female)

"I've distanced myself from those who are working... I don't want to be around people when I'm feeling low" (participant 7, male)

Theme 3: Financial Challenges

The inability to secure employment has left participants financially dependent on family or partners, limiting their ability to pursue further education and meet basic needs. The theme of financial challenges highlights the significant economic strain participants face due to prolonged unemployment. The subthemes yielded from this theme include financial dependence, limited opportunities for furthering studies, and inability to meet basic needs.

Subtheme 3.1: Financial Dependence

Many participants feel the burden of being financially dependent on others. Participants reported great reluctance to request financial assistance, indicating the emotional burden of

dependency and feelings of guilt and shame as individuals struggle with the reality that they are not self-sufficient. This was verbalized by participant 8 in this manner,

"I hate having to ask my parents for money... it feels like I'm burdening them" (participant 8, female).

Subtheme 3.2: Limited Opportunities for Further Studies

Participants are unable to pursue further studies due to financial constraints. Participants emphasized an ardent desire to further their studies to improve their qualifications and increase their chances of employment. However, a lack of financial resources has made this goal unattainable. Participants emphasized this point in the following way:

"I want to further my studies, but I can't do that right now because I don't have money for fees" (participant 3, male).

Subtheme 3.3: Inability to Meet Basic Needs

Some participants struggle to meet their basic needs. Participants expressed how unemployment not only threatens their financial security but also limits their ability to pursue possibilities that could improve their situation. The inability to afford essential costs such as interview clothes and travel costs intensifies the problem of seeking work and being trapped in economic and emotional distress. This was expressed in this way,

"I can't afford to buy clothes for interviews or cover the costs of travelling for job opportunities" (participant 8, female).

Theme 4: Impact on Romantic Relationships

Unemployment affects romantic relationships, leading to financial dependency and emotional strain. Some participants rely on their partners for financial support, which creates tension and affects their self-esteem. According to this theme, unemployment affects romantic relationships, leading to financial dependency and emotional strain. Participants reported relying on their partners for financial support, which creates tension and affects self-esteem. The sub-themes yielded in this theme include financial dependency, emotional strain, and partner support.

Sub-Theme 4.1: Financial Dependency

Participants often depend on their partners for financial assistance, leading to embarrassment and strain in the relationship. Participants expressed the emotional distress that follows from relying on their partners for financial support during unemployment.

They reported feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable due to their dependence, affecting their sense of autonomy and self-worth. They also acknowledged the strain the financial dependence places on their partners. Participants alluded to this in the following manner:

"I rely on my partner to buy basic needs like toiletries, and it makes me feel embarrassed."

(Participant 3, male)

"My partner supports me financially here and there, but it's a lot of pressure on him."

(Participant 2, female)

Sub-Theme 4.2: Emotional Strain

Financial dependency creates emotional tension within relationships, as participants feel they are burdening their partners. Participants stated that they feel like a burden because their partner must support them and the child. Financial dependency places an excessive load on the employed partner, who may feel forced to take on extra responsibilities, further damaging the relationship. The financial strain not only disrupts the emotional balance of the relationship but also causes feelings of powerlessness and frustration. This was highlighted in this manner:

"It takes a toll on him because now it's like he has another baby to take care of."

(Participant 3, male)

"I feel like a burden to my partner because he has to support me and my child."

(Participant 2, female)

Sub-Theme 4.3: Partner Support

Despite the challenges, some participants acknowledge that their partners offer emotional support, helping them navigate the stress of unemployment. They expressed that the spouse offered encouragement and comfort, which not only provides consolation but fosters a sense of hope, counteracting feelings of despair that often come with unemployment. Participants shared the following:

"My partner understands me more than my friends or family; he consoles me and tells me everything will be okay." (Participant 2, female)

"He helps me emotionally, reminding me that I will get a job one day." (Participant 3, male)

Theme 5: Community Perception

Unemployment affects the way individuals are perceived and treated within their communities. Participants shared experiences of being judged or overlooked due to their lack

of employment, which deepened feelings of isolation and discouragement. Three subthemes have resulted from this central theme: judgement by the community, loss of respect, and exclusion from community activities.

Sub-Theme 5.1: Judgment by the Community

Unemployed graduates feel judged by community members and are often labelled or stereotyped due to their inability to secure jobs. One participant stated that community members tend only to respect individuals who have secure work, whereas the unemployed are viewed as inferior or "nothing." Another participant also addressed the verbal harassment and gossip they experienced from community members, including being called offensive names. This was highlighted in this manner:

"People in the community respect those who are stable in life. If you don't have a job, they see you as nothing." (Participant 1, female)

"They gossip about me and call me names like 'mahlalela' because I am always at home."
(Participant 2, female)

Sub-Theme 5.2: Loss of Respect

Participants feel that community members no longer value their opinions or contributions because they are not financially independent. They reported a diminished sense of respect and recognition within their community. Some believe their contributions and opinions are ignored because they are not financially independent, reducing esteem and status, and creating feelings of insignificance and social exclusion. Participants verbalized that:

"Even if you are involved in community projects, they will not take you seriously because you bring nothing to the table." (Participant 1, female)

"They see me as useless because I've graduated but haven't achieved anything." (Participant 2, female)

Sub-Theme 5.3: Exclusion from Community Activities

Some participants distance themselves from community activities due to the perceived lack of respect and value placed on their presence. They expressed that they avoid community activities or engagements since their contributions are looked down upon, resulting in discouragement from engaging. They also verbalized that they are self-isolated from community members, preferring to spend time alone to avoid misjudgment. This was reported in this manner:

"I don't get involved in community projects because even if I suggest something, no one will take me seriously." (Participant 1)

"I prefer spending time alone because of the misjudgment from the community." (Participant 2)

4. Discussion

The data analysis produced five key themes which are discussed in this section. The themes outlined the experiences of graduate unemployment under three subthemes. The findings have found that most unemployed individuals who were part of the study experience significant psychological and emotional tolls, leading to increased anxiety and depression, loss of self-worth and social isolation, especially for graduates who enter the labour market with high hopes and expectations.

As one participant shared, the anxiety and depression that accompany this struggle make them feel as though they are burdened by the weight of their perceived failures. Participants who have invested more time and resources in higher education and cannot secure employment often experience a sharp decline in self-esteem. This finding concurs with that of Arena et al. (2023), which reports that prolonged unemployment can trigger or exacerbate mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. The repeated experience of rejection can lead to increased self-doubt, diminished motivation, and a pervasive sense of failure (Twenge et al., 2018).

The societal pressure to succeed adds to these feelings, leading the participants to internalize their unemployment status as a personal failure rather than a reflection of the broader economic issues. This loss of self-worth becomes profoundly embedded as they constantly face rejection or cannot secure employment. Participants reported a loss of self-worth, which caused them to withdraw socially, increasing feelings of isolation and shame. Their fear of being judged or questioned about their unemployment status causes avoidance behaviours, intensifying feelings of loneliness, and disconnecting from their support systems.

The findings of this study also highlighted disturbing concerns regarding suicidal thoughts as a response to prolonged unemployment. Participants exhibited feelings of hopelessness and lack of purpose, which are typical results for individuals who are unable to find work for an extended period. Research has shown that there is a strong correlation between

unemployment and an increased risk of committing suicide. This is consistent with current research, which demonstrates a strong correlation between long-term unemployment and mental health crises such as depression and suicidal thoughts.

According to a study by Blustein et al. (2020), economic stressors such as unemployment deteriorate mental health, and the lack of employment is particularly harmful in environments where individuals measure their worth by their professional accomplishments. The participants reported "feeling useless", which illustrates how being unemployed takes away one's sense of purpose and makes one feel as though they are no longer valuable to society.

Furthermore, the findings also revealed that unemployment has an enormous impact on relationships with family and friends, creating both supportive and strained dynamics. Some of the participants highlighted that they have supportive family members who offer emotional support, understanding, and encouragement, which helps alleviate anxiety and stress and provides a sense of security and comfort. These findings are consistent with existing research, which shows that family support is critical during unemployment (McKee-Ryan et al., 2020). Family support provides emotional and financial consolation and a sense of security in challenging times. However, some of the participants reported that although their families were understanding, they occasionally felt like a burden to them. Participants also mentioned how their family tries to help with job searches and offer emotional support, yet underlying shame lingers.

In contrast, friendships, on the other hand, became strained due to differences in life circumstances, resulting in social alienation and feelings of loneliness. Some participants expressed that they withdrew from their friendship connections due to not being able to match their peers' standard of living, causing feelings of inadequacy and shame. Participants struggled to relate to the unemployed individual's new circumstances, leading to decreased social interactions and shared activities. Changes in social routines and a lack of common topics further worsened this distance. According to a study conducted by Feather & O'Brien (2022) on the social repercussions of unemployment, as socioeconomic differences become more prominent, people frequently experience strained relationships with their employed peers. This growing disparity is especially evident in friendships, where employed

individuals may unintentionally foster feelings of inferiority and self-doubt in their unemployed friends by sharing their accomplishments or bragging.

Additionally, participants reported being left out in social and community settings. The stigma of unemployment, along with internalized feelings of failure, caused them to avoid social situations where their unemployment status may be a topic of discussion. Some participants reported avoiding social settings entirely to avoid judgment. Over time, this isolation deepened, cutting individuals off from critical support networks and producing a sense of loneliness that worsens the psychological toll of unemployment. The interaction of supportive family dynamics and distant friendships, combined with social isolation, demonstrates how unemployment impacts not just an individual's economic circumstance but also their social relationships and emotional well-being.

Moreover, financial difficulties emerged as a recurring subject, with participants being unable to find employment and financially dependent on family members or romantic partners. Financial dependence appeared to be a significant concern as participants reported feeling uncomfortable requesting financial assistance from parents, as it made them feel like a burden, contributing to a loss of independence. Unemployment also limits their ability to further their education and meet basic requirements, producing a sense of stagnation and powerlessness.

A study conducted by Jung & Richardson (2020) found comparable results, emphasizing the significant financial effects of unemployment, such as reduced household income, diminished financial autonomy, and increased dependency on social support networks. According to the authors, financial strain can increase psychological discomfort, intensifying the detrimental effects of unemployment (Jung & Richardson, 2020). The most pressing concern, however, is the inability to meet basic needs such as clothing and transport, which have actively limited their capacity to seek employment. These financial challenges create a constant state of crisis in the participants' lives, leaving little room for long-term planning or hope for the future.

The findings also highlighted that unemployment has a complex impact on romantic relationships, resulting in financial dependency, emotional distress, and altered power dynamics. Participants indicated reliance on partners for basic needs like toiletries, which can lead to feelings of dependency and cause diminished self-esteem. The unemployed partners feel a deep sense of inadequacy for not being able to contribute financially, causing

feelings of shame and embarrassment, while the employed partner feels the pressure of supporting both individuals. These findings are consistent with those of Uysal-Bozasçi et al. (2020), who highlight the negative impacts of unemployment on relationship quality, such as increased conflict, decreased intimacy, and emotional withdrawal.

Despite the challenges, some of the participants in the study acknowledged that their romantic partners provide emotional support, which helps them maneuver through the stress of unemployment. A caring spouse offers empathy and encouragement to help ease the emotional toll of unemployment. Participants reported that partners provide emotional comfort, assist with job searches, or simply be patient during tough times by providing encouragement and allowing the unemployed partner to keep optimism and resilience. These findings support the literature of (Kim et al., 2020), which highlights the importance of partner support in alleviating the negative effects of unemployment, such as alleviating stress and anxiety, increasing relationship satisfaction, and developing resilience.

The findings have further revealed that unemployment tremendously impacts how participants are regarded and treated in their communities. Participants reported experiencing judgment from the community and being called names, which resulted in social ostracism, making it difficult for individuals to maintain social connections and participate in community activities. Joblessness results in social marginalization, stigma, and feelings of shame. When individuals are unemployed, they may face judgmental attitudes from others, resulting in greater isolation and low self-esteem. For example, according to an American Psychological Association survey, 63% of unemployed people reported feeling nervous or depressed because of societal pressure and shame.

Finally, participants also reported diminished social value as individuals perceived their lack of financial independence as a loss of credibility and influence within their communities. They feel that their opinions and contributions are not respected or considered necessary, further intensifying feelings of inadequacy and loss of esteem. They are viewed as having "failed" to meet expectations and are useless. Social recognition and validation are critical to self-esteem and identity, especially for young people transitioning into adulthood. Without financial stability, unemployed graduates struggle to find a sense of belonging and worth within their

communities, which leads to a feeling of being disconnected from the community and eroding self-worth.

5. Implications of the Study

Unemployed graduates frequently experience psychological setbacks such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. The findings indicate a critical need for mental health services tailored to the challenges faced by unemployed graduates in the municipality. Local health authorities and community organizations should implement easily accessible mental health services to combat anxiety, depression, and social isolation among unemployed youth. To assist unemployed graduates throughout the transition period, local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should provide financial literacy programs and temporary financial aid. This could include developing stipend-based training programs or internships to decrease graduates' financial burdens.

The shift from academic achievement to unemployment is particularly traumatic for many graduates. Many graduates find it challenging to transition from academic accomplishments to unemployment. Higher education institutions and local governments should collaborate to better prepare students for future career difficulties. This could include incorporating mental health resilience programs into final-year courses and providing workshops on emotional and vocational readiness to help graduates develop coping mechanisms for life after graduation. Graduate unemployment is directly related to more immense systemic difficulties, such as the region's lack of job opportunities. As a result, there is an urgent need for local officials to prioritize job creation and skill development initiatives for graduates. Collaborating with local businesses to establish internships, apprenticeships, and graduate employment opportunities can assist in reducing unemployment.

6. Conclusion

The key findings show that unemployment has far-reaching implications for individuals, affecting them financially, psychologically, socially, and relationally. The findings also demonstrate that unemployment significantly impacts an individual's mental health, relationships, and social standing. It causes depression, anxiety, and isolation, strains friendships, generates financial dependence, and challenges romantic connections. Communities frequently condemn and exclude the unemployed, aggravating their struggles.

These findings imply that unemployment goes beyond the loss of income, affecting every aspect of an individual's life and their connection to society.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

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SECTION C:
CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This study was based on exploring and describing the experiences of unemployment amongst youth graduates in Collins Chabae municipality, Limpopo province in South Africa. This section outlines the conclusions drawn from the two manuscripts, followed by the study's recommendations and limitations. Concluding remarks will then be provided based on the assessment of the whole research study. All these will be informative regarding the significance of the research study and whether the purpose of the study was met.

Conclusions from the manuscripts

This section summarizes the key findings from the two studies conducted, "Navigating the Gap: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Higher Education Youth Graduates in South Africa and the Neighboring Countries: A Systematic Review" and "The Unseen Struggle: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Young Graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality in rural Limpopo." These studies explored the challenges and lived experiences of unemployed graduates, highlighting the emotional, psychological, social, and economic effects of unemployment. Through focused community research, these studies highlight significant barriers that youth graduates encounter in securing employment, and the challenges associated with prolonged unemployment.

Article 1: Navigating the Gap: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Higher Education Youth Graduates in South Africa and the Neighbouring Countries: A Systematic Review: Conclusion

The systematic review explored and described the lived experiences of unemployed youth graduates from South Africa and other African countries. The results indicate that being an unemployed graduate triggers more negative feelings than positive ones. Furthermore, unemployed graduates experience severe psychological impacts such as social exclusion, false accusations, a loss of respect from family, friends, and the community, as well as delayed adulthood. This study adds to the existing body of literature on emerging adults by highlighting the effects of unemployment on the ability to fulfil expected adult responsibilities. It also emphasizes the stagnation encountered by graduates who have put considerable time and effort into their education but experienced structural barriers in the labor market that hindered their employment prospects. The disappointment and distress from unemployment are particularly acute given the investment in higher education. While more effective interventions are required to reduce graduate unemployment, further research is essential to help emerging adults explore alternative pathways to achieving adult status.

Article 2: The Unseen Struggle: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Young Graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality in rural Limpopo: Conclusion

The key findings show that unemployment has far-reaching implications for individuals, affecting them financially, psychologically, socially, and relationally. The findings also demonstrate that unemployment significantly impacts an individual's mental health, relationships, and social standing. It causes depression, anxiety, and isolation, strains friendships, generates financial dependence, and challenges romantic connections. Communities frequently condemn and exclude the unemployed, aggravating their struggles. These findings imply that unemployment goes beyond the loss of income, affecting every aspect of an individual's life and their connection to society.

General Conclusion for the Study

Graduate unemployment is a complex challenge requiring targeted interventions. The study met its purpose by providing an in-depth investigation of the experiences of unemployed graduates. The key findings revealed that higher education qualifications do not guarantee employment, as graduates often encounter barriers such as nepotism and corruption, a lack of practical work experience, and economic hardships. It was stated that most unemployed graduates survived by being reliant on their parents. The findings also highlight that unemployment among graduates resulted in detrimental social, psychological, and economic effects. Discrimination and loss of power are encountered daily. Loss of hope, frustration, and unpleasant job search due to financial constraints were found to be major challenges.

Conclusions can also be drawn that a lack of social connections in the labor market contributed to the unemployment of participants. Furthermore, due to financial difficulties, participants were unable to completely engage with peers. The participants viewed their exclusion from unemployment as not only impacting on their immediate family's well-being, but also their present and future well-being. There is a very crucial need to align higher education with labor market demands, work-integrated learning, career guidance, and easier access to vocational training. Furthermore, this study calls for comprehensive strategies that address the mental health needs of unemployed graduates while also creating opportunities for economic and social integration. The results reveal a critical need for collaborative efforts between governments, higher learning institutions, and the private sector to bridge the gap between education and unemployment, empowering graduates to attain meaningful economic participation and social inclusion.

Recommendations of the Study

It is paramount that policymakers in higher learning institutions reformulate skills policies and ensure that graduates are equipped with skills aligned with the current labor market demands. Higher education institutions should also aim to prioritize work-integrated learning, such as internships, learnerships, apprenticeships, and industry partnerships, to provide students with practical, hands-on experience and to better prepare graduates for the labor market. Social workers could play a significant role as educators; for instance, they inform the youth about different initiatives that exist for the youth, such as the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), the Youth Employment Index, the National Youth Development Service Council, and other government initiatives.

Government policies and programs should encourage self-employment and instill entrepreneurial skills in young people through education. The government should promote equal access to work opportunities in all economic sectors through merit-based recruiting and hiring, rather than based on nepotism and corruption. On the other hand, the government should enhance macroeconomic policies to attract foreign investors by creating supportive political and economic policies, promoting economic growth to generate more jobs, and having the capacity to monitor and evaluate internship programs to assess whether they are being utilized efficiently.

Graduate employment programs should be widely promoted to guarantee accessibility, focusing on diversity across all races, ethnicity and institution ethnicities, and institutions. This kind of program expansion will help ensure that all graduates have fair access to employment opportunities and support. Further studies could incorporate a comparison of unemployed graduates in rural and urban settings. This would broaden the application of the findings and provide a deeper understanding of the factors impacting graduate unemployment across different contexts.

Limitations of the Study

The conditions described and presented in this study are exclusive to one rural community characterized by extremely high levels of unemployment. The study was conducted among Collins Chabane Municipality graduates; therefore, it cannot be generalized to other areas, as it does not represent the larger population. Similar studies of rural unemployment in other areas, both in Limpopo and other provinces, are needed to validate the findings of this study. Another limitation is that all the graduates are from the same racial group, which limits the discussion of how race contributes to the prolonged unemployment of graduates.

An additional limitation pertains to the sampling technique employed. Snowball sampling was used in the study, which could have resulted in selection bias because participants were prone to

recommend people with similar backgrounds or experiences. This might have reduced the range of perspectives that the study was able to capture. Qualitative research quality is heavily dependent on the researcher's skills and is more susceptible to the researcher's biases than is the case with quantitative research. The researcher's presence during data collection, which is often unavoidable in qualitative research, can affect the participants' responses. Issues of anonymity and confidentiality may raise concerns when presenting the findings.

Summary of the Mini-Dissertation

The nature of the qualitative study enabled the researcher to explore the experiences of youth graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality, Limpopo province. The study findings revealed that despite holding higher education qualifications, more is needed to ensure the employability of graduates. The graduates in this study actively sought employment opportunities after completing their studies, driven to improve the financial circumstances of their immediate families and become financially independent, given that most of them originate from low-income households. However, the transition into the labour market has been deeply disappointing, with graduates still unable to secure employment. The narrated experiences demonstrated that youth unemployment, particularly among graduates, has far-reaching effects. The day-to-day efforts to obtain employment are often frustrating for the youth, and how they engage with the reality of being unemployed as degree holders. The findings in this study highlighted that, although graduate unemployment is primarily an individual problem, external factors contribute to the problem and worsen the situation. Therefore, interventions need to be aimed at assisting severely impacted individuals, offering pathways to stability and opportunities for economic advancement.

ANNEXURE A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE

ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

NAME OF RESEARCHER/INVESTIGATOR:
Ms K Mthembu

STUDENT NO:
23014382

PROJECT TITLE: **Navigating the gap: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Higher Education Graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality.**

ETHICAL CLEARANCE NO: **FHS/24/PH/18/0708**

SUPERVISORS/ CO-RESEARCHERS/ CO-INVESTIGATORS

NAME	INSTITUTION & DEPARTMENT	ROLE
Prof M Maluleke	UNIVEN, PUBLIC HEALTH	Supervisor
Dr BS Manganye	UNIVEN, ADVANCED NURSING SCIENCE	Co-Supervisor
Ms K Mthembu	UNIVEN, PUBLIC HEALTH	Investigator – Student

Type: **Masters Research**

Risk: **Minimal risk to humans, animals, or environment (Category 2)**

Approval Period: **August 2024 – August 2025**

The Human and Clinical Trials Research Ethics Committee (HCTREC) hereby approves your project as indicated above.

General Conditions

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, please note the following.

- The project leader (principal investigator) must report in the prescribed format to the REC:
 - Annually (or as otherwise requested) on the progress of the project, and upon completion of the project.
 - Within 48hrs in case of any adverse event (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the project.
 - Annually a number of projects may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The approval applies strictly to the protocol as stipulated in the application form. Would any changes to the protocol be deemed necessary during the course of the project, the project leader must apply for approval of these changes at the REC. Would there be deviation from the project protocol without the necessary approval of such changes, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the project may be started. Would the project have to continue after the expiry date; a new application must be made to the REC and new approval received before or on the expiry date.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility, the REC retains the right to:
 - Request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the project,
 - To ask further questions; Seek additional information; Require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process.
 - Withdraw or postpone approval if:
 - Any unethical principles or practices of the project are revealed or suspected.
 - It becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the REC or that information has been false or misrepresented.
 - The required annual report and reporting of adverse events was not done timely and accurately.
 - New institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.

ISSUED BY:

UNIVERSITY OF VENDA, RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Date Considered: August 2024

Name of the HCTREC Chairperson of the Committee: Prof NS Mashau

Signature: 



ANNEXURE B: LETTER OF CONSENT

Dear Participants,

My name is Kabelo Hope Mthembi, and I am conducting a research study titled **"Navigating the Gap: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Higher Education Youth Graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality in the Limpopo Province"** to obtain my master's degree in public health at the **University of Venda**, student number **23014382**.

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the experiences of unemployed graduates in the selected community of Mavambe under Collins Chabane Municipality. Upon agreement to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview, provide information about your experiences and perspectives on graduate unemployment, allow the researcher to use anonymized data from your responses for analysis and reporting purposes. The interview is expected to last approximately 35-40 minutes and will be conducted at a location and time convenient for you.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question you are uncomfortable with and may withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or consequence. Your responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. All identifying information will be anonymized in the research findings.

If you agree to participate in the study, please fill in your details on the attached consent form. You can reach me on my personal number 072 242 6289 or my email Kabelo.Mthembi@univen.ac.za should you need any clarification.

Your participation will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,
Kabelo Mthembi

ANNEXURE C: CONSENT FORM

General:

Potential participants must be assured that participation is voluntary and the approximate number of participants to be included should be disclosed. A copy of the information letter should be issued to participants. The information letter and consent form must be translated and provided in the primary spoken language of the research population

CONSENT

Statement of Agreement to Participate in the Research Study:

- I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher, Kabelo Mthembi, about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study - Research Ethics Clearance Number: __,
- I have also received, read and understood the above written information (*Participant Letter of Information*) regarding the study.
- I am aware that the results of the study, including personal details regarding my sex, age, date of birth, initials and diagnosis will be anonymously processed into a study report.
- In view of the requirements of research, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerized system by the researcher.
- I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declared myself prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that significant new findings developed during the course of this research which may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

Full Name of Participant	Date	Time	Signature
I, ...			

(*Kabelo Mthembi*) herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully
Informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

Full Name of Researcher

Kabelo Mthembi

Date...**08/06/24**

Signature...



Full Name of Witness (If applicable)

.....

Date

Signature.....

ANNEXURE D: PERMISSION LETTER FROM THE TRIBAL AUTHORITY

Mavambe Traditional Council

Date: 30. August 2024

TO: Ms kabelo Hope Mthembi
University of Venda
P/Bag x5050
0950

RE: **Permission to conduct research**

Please note that the Mavambe community authority permits you to conduct a research study on Navigating the Gap: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Higher Education Graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality.

Your request has been forwarded to Mavambe youth leaders Mr Ubisi Joshua (072 364 5951) and Ms Manganyi Xithembiso (073 092 8493). Please contact them for further arrangements.



Chairperson

1. Ubisi J, youth rep



2. Mabasa T, Civic



4. Elias K Bila

Community Rep.

Council Chairperson



Bila R

Annexure E: Interview Schedule with Unemployed Graduates

Section A: Demographical Information

NB: The information in this study will be treated confidentially.

1. Name (pseudonyms only):
2. Gender:
3. Age:
4. Degree obtained:
5. Field of Study:
6. Higher Education Institution:
7. Number of Years since Graduation:

Section B: An Exploration of Experiences of Unemployed Youth Graduates

- ❖ What challenges do you face as an unemployed graduate in general, and yourself in particular?
- ❖ How has your unemployment status affected you psychologically?
- ❖ How is unemployment affecting your relationship with your family and friends?
- ❖ How has being unemployed affected the role that you play within your community?
- ❖ What do you think is the reason that has caused you to remain unemployed despite applying for jobs?
- ❖ What financial implications have you suffered due to being unemployed?
- ❖ How do you make ends meet given that you do not have means of income?
- ❖ What do you think are the consequences of unemployment for other graduates besides yourself?
- ❖ What coping mechanisms or survival strategies have you adopted to help with coping as an unemployed graduate?
- ❖ What would being employed mean to you? What difference will it make in your life?

Section C: Ways to Promote Job Creation for Unemployed Graduates in South Africa

- ❖ What government programmes are you aware of that are aimed at assisting youth graduates with employment opportunities?
- ❖ In your opinion how effective are these initiatives?
- ❖ Do you think the South African government is doing enough to address youth unemployment?
- ❖ What should be put in place that can promote unemployment amongst youth graduates in Mavambe community, Limpopo province?

THE END!!!

ANNEXURE F: EDITOR'S LETTER

EDITOR'S LETTER

To whom it may concern

Dear Sir/Madam

This is to authenticate that I, Zitha Innocent, have proofread and edited a mini dissertation for a master in Public Health degree in the Departmental of Public Health in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Venda entitled **NAVIGATING THE GAP: UNPACKING THE UNEMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION YOUTH GRADUATES IN COLLINS CHABANE MUNICIPALITY IN THE LIMPOPO PROVINCE**

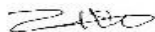
BY

KABELO HOPE MTHEMBI

Student number: 23014382

I have meticulously and comprehensively inspected this mini dissertation for consistency, coherence, and correctness of language use, ensuring proper register usage and citations. I have suggested several amendments, which were communicated to the student for consideration and implementation. The student has undertaken to effect these amendments before this research project is finally submitted.

Best Regards



Date: 25/11/2024

Contact No: 0715430998/ 015 962 8922

Email: Innocent.Zitha@univen.ac.za and Zitha960@gmail.com

BA Hons (English), MA (English), PhD (current studies), My expertise in English language and communication has equipped me with the skills necessary to provide thorough and accurate proofreading and editing services.

ANNEXURE G: PROOF OF JOURNAL SUBMISSION

susy@mdpi.com on behalf of Editorial Office <challenges@mdpi.com>  ...

To:  Kabelo Mthembi Sun 11/24/2024 10:18 PM

Cc:  Mary Maluleke;  Bumani BS. Manganye; **+1 other**

Dear Ms. Mthembi,

Thank you very much for uploading the following manuscript to the MDPI submission system. One of our editors will be in touch with you soon.

Journal name: Challenges
Manuscript ID: challenges-3361708
Type of manuscript: Review
Title: Navigating the Gap: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Higher Education Youth Graduates in South Africa and the Neighbouring Countries: A Systematic Review
Authors: Kabelo Mthembi *, Mary Maluleke, Bumani Solomon Manganye, Lufuno Makhado
Received: 24 Nov 2024
E-mails: kabelo.mthembi@univen.ac.za, mary.maluleke@univen.ac.za, bumani.manganye@univen.ac.za, lufuno.makhado@univen.ac.za

We encourage you to provide an Author Biography on this publication's webpage. Please click the following link to find the corresponding

ANNEXURE H: PROOF OF JOURNAL SUBMISSION 2

[Social Sciences] Manuscript ID: socsci-3369028 - Submission Received

EO

susy@mdpi.com on behalf of Editorial Office<socsci@mdpi.com>



...

To:  Kabelo Mthembi

Thu 11/28/2024 9:02 AM

Cc: **+3 others**

Dear Ms. Mthembi,

Thank you very much for uploading the following manuscript to the MDPI submission system. One of our editors will be in touch with you soon.

Journal name: Social Sciences

Manuscript ID: socsci-3369028

Type of manuscript: Article

Title: The Unseen Struggle: Unpacking the Unemployment Experiences of Young Graduates in Collins Chabane Municipality in rural Limpopo.

Authors: Kabelo Mthembi *, Mary Maluleke, Bumani Solomon Manganye, Lufuno Makhado

Received: 28 Nov 2024

E-mails: kabelo.mthembi@univen.ac.za, mary.maluleke@univen.ac.za,
bumani.manganye@univen.ac.za, lufuno.makhado@univen.ac.za

ANNEXURE I: ORIGINALITY REPORT

Mthembi KH Final Mini Dissertation

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