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Drawbacks Associated with the Perceptions and Beliefs on the Underutilisation of Mental Healthcare Services at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa

Dikotla M.

The Discipline of Social Work, School of Human & Community Development,
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa

Deka J.

The Discipline of Social Work, School of Human & Community Development,
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa

Lelaka C. M.*

The Discipline of Social Work, School of Human & Community Development,
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa

[*Corresponding author]

Abstract

Mental health is an essential component of overall well-being, with approximately one in eight people globally, or around 970 million individuals, living with a mental disorder. Among these, anxiety and depression are the most prevalent, often emerging during adolescence. Despite the rising demand for mental health support, many students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) underutilise available mental healthcare services. This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a phenomenological design to explore the perceptions and beliefs surrounding this underutilization. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, comprising six students from the Faculty of Humanities. Data were collected face to face using semi-structured interview guide and analysed thematically. The findings revealed various perceptions and interplay of cultural, social, and spiritual barriers that discourage students from seeking mental health support. Access to mental healthcare services emerged as a significant factor including student's own religious and spiritual belief in managing mental health. These perceptions leading some students to view psychological interventions as unnecessary or ineffective. Additionally, misinformation regarding the nature and benefits of mental health services contributes to a lack of awareness among students about the services available on campus. The study highlights the necessity of addressing these multifaceted barriers through initiatives aimed at increasing awareness, information and education, enhancing cultural and religious sensitivity, and improving outreach efforts to inform students about available mental health services at the university.

Keywords

Beliefs, Mental Health, Perceptions, Underutilization

INTRODUCTION

Mental health has become a more prominent topic today than it was in the past. According to the World Health Organisation (2022), mental health refers to a state of well-being in which individuals can manage the usual demands of life, work efficiently, and have a positive contribution to the community. This involves emotional, psychological, and social well-being, influencing how people think, feel, and act and it encompasses the capacity for decision-making, relationship maintenance, and stress management. According to the World Health Organization (2022), approximately one in eight people globally, or about 970 million individuals, live with a mental disorder, with anxiety and depression being the most common, often emerging during adolescence (Mabrouk et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further aggravated this situation, leading to a 26% and 28% rise in anxiety and depressive disorders, respectively, within just one

year (World Health Organization, 2022). Mabrouk et al. (2022) also highlight that in 16 Sub-Saharan countries, the prevalence of mental health symptoms and disorders is high, particularly among adolescents, with a greater burden compared to high-income countries. One in seven adolescents face mental health challenges, and 10% meet the criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis (Brits, 2021). Despite these challenges, adolescents often find it difficult to seek help due to the stigma surrounding mental health issues. For instance, in Nigeria, the 'lunacy act' legitimizes discrimination and the violation of human rights experienced by individuals with mental health disorders (Brits, 2021). A new study in South Africa revealed that more than 25% of South Africans may suffer from depression, with certain provinces showing higher levels (Wits University, 2022). Higher education institutions are particularly affected by mental health issues. Although mental health services are available to assist students facing these challenges, the underutilization of these services remains high, primarily due to stigma, lack of awareness about available services, and differing cultural beliefs about mental health (Osborn, Saunders & Fonagy, 2022).

Mental health continues to be a public health concern globally as it affects people's normal daily functioning, subjecting them to different compromised emotional states (Shim, Eaker & Park, 2022). Existing studies have shown the severity of the psychological distress experienced by university students recently. These psychological distresses cover a wide range of symptoms from normal mood swings to the development of serious mental illnesses such as anxiety, psychosis, bipolar and depression (Osborn et al., 2022). Research that was recently conducted by Mutinta (2022) among the university students in the Eastern Cape province revealed significant trends in the rising numbers of students experiencing mental distress, exceeding that of the general population of the Eastern Cape. To add to these statistics, not only in South Africa, but also in other countries. Siddique et al. (2022) substantiated the statement by also revealing the rising numbers of students among universities in Bangladesh struggling with mental health. Mental health difficulties tend to have a negative impact on the academic performance of students, affects their sociability and relationships and can also affect their level of energy and enthusiasm in both academics and social life (Shim, Eaker & Park, 2022). To ensure that students have their psychosocial needs taken care of, universities offer mental health services in a form of counselling and therapy (Osborn et al., 2022), however, despite the widespread mental health challenges, it is surprising that these services remain frequently underutilized. Students would rather rely on informal sources of aid such as friends, families, and the internet rather than seeking for professional help (Kukoyi, Orok, Oluwafemi, Oluwadare, Oni, Bamitale, Jaiyesimi, Ojo & Eze, 2022). This could potentially lead to students accessing false information and further worsening mental health issues.

The underutilization of mental health services and the reliance on unprofessional information is a significant public health concern that must be thoroughly addressed. It is essential to understand the factors affecting the use of mental health services in universities to introduce and implement more effective interventions that accommodate all students. Several reasons contribute to the underutilization of these services, including a lack of awareness about available resources, cultural beliefs surrounding mental health services like counselling and therapy (Holub et al., 2022), the stigma both societal and self-imposed (Giroux & Geiss, 2019) associated with mental health issues, and scepticism about the effectiveness of these services. Additionally, concerns about the confidentiality of shared information also deter students from seeking help (Osborn et al., 2022). At the University of the Witwatersrand, various sociodemographic factors have been identified as leading causes of depression among students, yet the reasons for underutilizing available mental health services have not been thoroughly explored. This research intends to explore the drawbacks associated with the perceptions and beliefs on the underutilisation of mental healthcare services at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Theoretical Structure

The theoretical framework proposed for this study is systems theory, also known as general systems theory. Introduced in the mid-20th century by Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (Heil, n.d), this theory aims to create a holistic framework that describes the interrelations and interdependencies of various parts within a whole system, be it in chemistry, engineering, ecology, or psychology (Drack & Pouvreau, 2015). Bertalanffy stressed the importance of viewing systems holistically rather than reducing them to their individual components. While some authors agree with Bertalanffy's perspective on systems theory, it has also been critiqued for its abstract nature. Despite this, the theory remains valuable in various fields. For example, Peter Senge (Bui, 2020) emphasizes the significance of systems thinking in organizational learning, while Flood and Carson acknowledge its limitations, noting that its abstractness can make it difficult to apply in real-world scenarios (Turner & Baker, 2019).

In this study, systems theory is based on the idea that an individual's behaviour, decisions, and development are closely linked to the systems that interact around them (Lai & Lin, 2017). In other words, a student's decision to use or avoid mental health services cannot be fully understood without considering the broader systems influencing them, such as cultural views, societal stigma, or the lack of awareness about available services (Holub et al., 2022). Systems theory is particularly relevant to this study as it enables the researcher to analyse the complex systems impacting students' decisions and mental health service utilization, and to propose more effective adjustments to mental health service delivery at universities.

One of the key advantages of systems theory is that it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human behaviour and the influences that shape it. By integrating knowledge from multiple scientific domains, it addresses the familial, social, and institutional factors that influence students' mental health decisions. For instance, students may

avoid getting help due to the societal stigma associated with mental health issues. The researcher will explore these external factors to understand how they affect students' willingness to access mental health services. Additionally, the study will examine how students' perceptions and beliefs about mental health services are shaped by their interactions with mental health professionals, peers, and university policies. However, recognizing the limitations of systems theory, such as its abstract nature and the challenges of applying it to practical situations, the researcher will also incorporate social learning theory to provide balance.

RESEARCH DESIGNATION

This paper will cover the following: the research method, research design, the study location, study population, sampling and sampling procedure, method of data collection and data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Research Method

The researcher employed a qualitative research approach. This approach is particularly effective for exploring complex, human-centred issues as it focuses on capturing individuals' perceptions, feelings, and experiences in depth. Qualitative research allows for a flexible, open-ended exploration of subjective viewpoints, making it ideal for understanding nuanced factors influencing students' interactions with mental health resources.

Research Design

Within this qualitative framework, the researcher selected a phenomenological design, which is well-suited to examining lived experiences and personal interpretations of specific phenomena (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019). The primary goal of a phenomenological design is to explore how individuals perceive and make meaning of their own experiences. This research allowed the researcher to delve into the reasons why students may feel reluctant to access mental health services, as well as the underlying beliefs or societal stigmas that contribute to these perceptions. Phenomenology provides the tools to capture these experiences in detail, allowing participants to articulate their thoughts on sensitive topics like mental health. Using this design enabled the researcher to gather authentic insights directly from students, resulting in a rich, comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the utilization of mental health services on campus.

The Study Location

The study took place at the university of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in South Africa. This university is one of the best and leading university in the country and offers various degrees to students. It offers part-time and full-time courses and various degrees.

POPULATION, SAMPLE AND SAMPLING PROCEDURES

Population

Population refers to the entire group that a researcher seeks to understand or draw conclusions about (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). In this study, the population consisted of students at the University of the Witwatersrand. By focusing on this specific population, the research aimed to capture a representative understanding of students' perceptions and beliefs regarding the underutilization of mental health services on campus.

Sample

A sample is a subset selected from the broader population to represent it in a research study (Shukla, 2020). In this research, the sample was drawn specifically from students enrolled in various degree programs within the Faculty of Humanities at Wits University. This targeted approach helped capture experiences relevant to Humanities students while representing the broader university population. The study included six students who participated in the interview.

Sampling Procedures

Sampling is defined as the process of selecting a representative subgroup from the larger population using specific techniques (Shukla, 2020). This study used both purposeful and snowball sampling methods to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling, as explained by Palinkas et al. (2015), involves selecting participants based on their ability to provide rich, relevant insights. Here, the researcher used purposeful sampling by selecting students who are in their second year of study and above, who were enrolled full-time at the University of the Witwatersrand, within the Faculty of Humanities. These criteria ensured that participants had sufficient experience with university life to provide meaningful input on mental health service usage.

Inclusion criteria

- Both male and female students
- Age of 18 years old and above
- Be registered full time at Wits University
- Fall within any degree program within the Faculty of Humanities
- Second year of study and above

Exclusion criteria

- Male or Female students
- Under the age of 18 years old
- Be registered as part time at Wits University
- Fall outside the Faculty of Humanities
- First year of study

Method of Gathering Data

According to Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger (2020), based on the research goals, aim and the research question, the researcher must be able to identify the methods they will use to collect data and achieve those goals. The researcher used a semi-structured interview to collect the data on the answers provided by the participants. The use of semi-structured interview was important in ensuring that all participants share their experiences in depth while still giving enough structure to guarantee that all relevant questions are addressed or answered. This method of data collection was important as it reduced biases (George & Merkus, 2023) due to its nature of asking the same set of questions to all the participants. It thus increased the trustworthiness of the study. Furthermore, audio recordings were protected using a deidentified code, all the names of participants were kept anonymous to protect their identities, and all transcriptions were used for accurate reference purposes.

Method of Data Analysis

Data analysis refers to the systematic process whereby the researcher organises, interprets, and makes sense of the data that she collected from the participants (Lester, Cho & Lochmiller, 2020). The researcher employed the thematic method of data analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018), which means that the researcher read through the answers obtained from the interview and deduct the meaning of the data from the different responses. The researcher applied the six-step guide which is helpful when thematically analysing data in qualitative research (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

TRUSTWORTHINESS

The research employed the four primary criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, to ensure rigorous, accurate findings. According to Stahl and King (2020), trustworthiness in qualitative research reflects the study's ability to achieve reliable, credible, transferable, and confirmable results.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In conducting this study, ethical clearance was sought from the university of Witwatersrand with the following reference number: SW24/06/01. Furthermore, ethical considerations were rigorously observed to protect the rights, privacy, and well-being of participants and to maintain the integrity of the research, as highlighted by Arifin (2018). The researcher employed a range of ethical protocols to ensure a respectful and secure environment for all participants, which is foundational in qualitative research.

RESULTS

The study included participants aged 18 and older, with a specified range extending beyond 50 years. However, all participants in the study were between 18 and 29 years old. Participants belong to various tribes and speaking the following languages: two (2) were Venda, two (2) were Xhosa, one (1) was Zulu whilst the other one (1) was Southern Sotho. Participants were from the following study levels: two (2) at second year level of study, two (2) at third year level of study, and the last two (2) were seniors, at fourth year level of study. They come from the following fields of study: One (1) has enrolled for Bachelor of Digital Arts (BA), one (1) enrolled for Bachelor of Education, one (1) enrolled Bachelor of Law/BA Law, one (1) enrolled for social work degree, and the remaining two (2) were enrolled for Bachelor of Arts in Psychology/BA Psychology.

Table 1 Demographics of participants (N=6)

Demographic factor	Variable	Number
Gender	Male	2
	Female	4
Age	18-29	6
	30-39	
	40-49	
	50 and above	
Race	African	6
	White	
	Coloured	
	Indian	
	Other	

Tribe	Venda	2
	Xhosa	2
	Zulu	1
	Southern Sotho	1
Year of study	2 nd	2
	3 rd	2
	4 th	2
Field of Study	BA Digital Arts	1
	BA Education	1
	BA Law	1
	BA Social work	1
	BA Psychology	2

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION

Theme 1 Perceptions on mental health

The participants' responses reveal a complex and often stigmatized view of mental health within their communities. Mental health is broadly perceived as encompassing both wellness and illness, but this dual understanding is often overshadowed by negative connotations.

"A lot of them feel like it doesn't exist...in their head, it's just like, everyone has stress, so what's wrong with you? So, they don't believe it's something that exists." - Grace

"Mental health has not been a concept that is dealt with. There is not deep delve on mental health. Growing up, you, you are just told that. No, you cannot be feeling this way. You are just making excuses. There is no time for bad days. There are no such things as mood swings. There are no such things as depression. You are just ill mannered. I can say those are like traditional views of mine." - Prudence.

These quotes align with broader literature indicating that cultural stigmas significantly impact perceptions of mental illness, particularly in communities where mental health is often misunderstood or minimized. Studies suggest that such stigma can discourage individuals from seeking help, as mental health concerns are frequently interpreted through cultural and societal norms rather than as legitimate health issues (Mohankumar, 2022). This is further supported by research emphasizing that family and social environments heavily influence mental health perceptions, leading to internalized stigma and underutilization of mental health resources (Smith & Jones, 2020).

Theme 2 Perceptions on beliefs about mental health

The above views highlight significant insights into how individuals view mental health within their cultural and societal contexts. Participants express a recognition of the reality of mental health issues but emphasize a lack of education on the topic. This knowledge gap leads to confusion and feelings of helplessness when individuals experience mental health challenges, as they may not know how to seek help or to whom to talk. Furthermore, societal, and cultural expectations impose rigid standards on individuals, particularly women and men, where strength and resilience are prioritized. Women are often expected to remain strong for their families, while men feel compelled to suppress their emotions and maintain composure. As a result, mental health is often viewed as a less genuine issue, further perpetuating the stigma and reluctance to engage in conversations about mental health.

"I think mental health is a real thing, but probably people are not educated on it enough. And that's why when people fall into those states, mental states, they do not really know how to deal with it, or do not really know who to talk to." - Gladness

"If you are a woman and you are going through things, you must be okay for your children... As a man, you cannot fall apart for your family." - Esther

"In culture, you are also taught to be strong... So, if something happens to you, you just must suck it up and be okay." - Andiswa

Research has shown that a lack of education regarding mental health contributes to stigma and misunderstanding, preventing individuals from recognizing the importance of seeking help (Shim et al., 2022). Additionally, cultural norms surrounding masculinity and femininity can hinder emotional expression and promote the idea that individuals must remain strong, which exacerbates mental health issues (Mahalik et al., 2023). Furthermore, societal attitudes often dismiss mental health as a critical concern, which can result in individuals feeling isolated and unsupported in their struggles (Shee et al., 2023).

Theme 3 Barriers to consultations

The above quotes revealed several key factors that discourage students from seeking mental health support. Participants highlighted the influence of religious and cultural beliefs as significant barriers. For instance, some believe that prayer alone is enough for emotional support, negating the need for professional help. Culturally rooted ideas, such as the belief that one must accept life's hardships or be strong, particularly for family members, also deter individuals from seeking mental health services. These expectations are especially pronounced among certain cultural groups, where mental health struggles might be seen as personal weaknesses. Additionally, gender stereotypes were mentioned, with men feeling the need to appear strong and therefore less likely to seek therapy or mental health support. Beyond cultural and gender-based barriers, participants noted issues with the quality of available services, such as unhelpful staff, which further discourages them from accessing support.

"So culturally at home, we're Xhosa...you have to be a strong person. If you're a woman and you're going through things, you have to be okay for your children." - Esther

Some people in my religion believe that just talking to God is their therapy... they don't see the need to go to a physical person therapist or seek professional help with mental health." – Andiswa

"Maybe boys feel like you're supposed to be strong, so you're not supposed to be feeling this sort of way...there's no need for you to be going to a therapist." - Grace

"Students do complain with the staff, they're not very nice, they're not very helpful." - Prudence

The above participants' views are consistent with recent literature showing that cultural and religious factors significantly impact mental health service utilization. (Ahad et al., 2023) found that cultural expectations around strength and resilience can contribute to stigma and discourage individuals from seeking help. Moreover, studies suggest that gender norms, particularly in cultures emphasizing male stoicism, can reduce the likelihood of men seeking mental health care (Hatzenbuehler & Phelan, 2019). These factors, compounded with perceived or actual barriers in accessing quality mental health services, create additional obstacles for those who may benefit from professional support.

Theme 4 Mental health services and accessibility

The quotes highlighted the varied perceptions of the availability and accessibility of mental health services. Some students express a lack of awareness about services like the CCDU, indicating that educational initiatives, particularly among first-year students, are crucial for informing individuals about available resources. Some participants believe that accessibility is hindered by misconceptions about costs and the time commitment required for regular appointments. While there is recognition of the effectiveness of the services provided, concerns remain regarding the length of time it takes to access these resources. Nevertheless, participants appreciate the straightforward process of accessing mental health services, as individuals can walk in and receive referrals without extensive bureaucratic procedures.

"I've heard people saying they didn't know about CCDU... That's why also as mentors, we're told to let first years know a lot about, just make sure that they know about CCDU." – Esther

"Apparently some people don't know about CCDU. Some think it's not free." – Grace

"Maybe others don't find the time also...you have to go there like every week." - Gladness

"I wouldn't say easily accessible, but they are effective...once you do get the programs and whatnot, and you do get the help that you need eventually. But the period accessing the services is long." - Kagiso

"I'd say they are accessible considering that a person can simply do a walk in, and they can be either referred to a psychologist at that department or a social worker without having to go through a whole process of maybe applying online and doing long processes of paperwork that may take long, I think is they are accessible." – Prudence

The quotes are consistent with recent literature where Hughes et al. (2020) emphasize that a lack of awareness and misunderstandings regarding costs significantly deter individuals from seeking mental health care. This aligns with participants' concerns about the need for better communication surrounding the availability of free services like CCDU. Additionally, the World Health Organization (2022) underscores that mental health services are frequently underutilized due to misconceptions about their accessibility and effectiveness. A study by World Health Organization (2022) notes that while some mental health services exist, systemic barriers such as long wait times and insufficient information about services continue to impede access.

Theme 5 Religious and spiritual beliefs in managing mental health

The above responses reveal that the students view faith as a significant factor in their approach to mental health. Many students believe that spiritual practices, such as prayer and reliance on religious teachings, serve as essential coping

mechanisms. There is a prevalent notion that mental health issues are often understood within a religious context, with many attributing these challenges to spiritual entities or conflicts. Additionally, participants express a belief that experiencing prolonged mental health struggles is unnatural, which may lead individuals to seek spiritual solutions rather than professional help.

"Some people in my religion believe that just talking to God is their therapy." – Kagiso

"Christianity and going to the Word of God has played a big part in helping me deal with the things..." – Gladness

"What happens, religiously with regards to mental health is that you must pray about and towards some problems... I have been told that those are like evil spirits, or it is in a way, an evil entity that has... visited you. You must pray and... do all you can to just get rid of it..." – Prudence

"It is deemed as unnatural to be in a depressive state for a long time, no matter the circumstances." – Esther

According to a review by Koenig et al. (2021), religious coping strategies, such as prayer and scripture study, are often employed to manage stress and mental health challenges, demonstrating significant positive effects on well-being and psychological resilience (Koenig, H. G., et al., 2021). Additionally, Pargament et al. (2019) found that individuals who engage in spiritual practices report lower levels of anxiety and depression, suggesting that such practices can provide emotional support and foster a sense of community during challenging times. Furthermore, a study by Božek et al. (2020) explored how religious beliefs can shape the understanding of mental health, often framing psychological issues as spiritual conflicts rather than medical problems, which can impact help-seeking behaviours and treatment approaches.

EXAMINATION OF THE RESULTS

The study aimed to explore the drawbacks associated with the perceptions and beliefs on the underutilisation of mental healthcare services at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. Data was collected using face-to-face semi structured interviews and analysed thematically. Results suggest that mental health services on campus are underutilized despite a growing demand. The findings reveal a combination of cultural, social, and informational barriers that inhibit students' willingness to seek support. A significant factor is the prevailing stigma associated with mental health issues, where students often fear being judged by peers or faculty. This societal pressure fosters a reluctance to access mental health services, as students may worry about appearing weak or "incapable." Cultural beliefs also play a crucial role in this underutilization. For some students, cultural backgrounds influence their perceptions of mental health, sometimes viewing psychological interventions as unnecessary or ineffective. Such beliefs can stem from family expectations or societal norms, where mental health struggles are perceived as personal weaknesses rather than medical or psychological issues. The study found that misinformation and misconceptions about the nature of mental health treatments contribute to this barrier, as students may not view counselling or therapy as viable or effective solutions for their concerns. Furthermore, a lack of awareness about the availability, range, and potential benefits of mental health services on campus was evident among participants. According to the participants, many students are either unaware of these resources or misinformed about their accessibility and purpose. This knowledge gap means that even those in need might miss out on services that could benefit them, simply because they are uninformed about what the university offers or how to access these resources. Furthermore, this multifaceted nature of the problem can help Universities to benefit from initiatives aimed at reducing stigma, improving cultural sensitivity in services, and increasing outreach efforts to ensure students know where and how they can receive mental health support. To further understand the reason behind the underutilization of the mental health services at Wits it is important to look at it through the system's theory and social learning theory. The systems theory emphasizes that an individual's behaviour is influenced by their surrounding social systems. In this context, the stigma surrounding mental health is reinforced by social networks, cultural beliefs, and university structures, all of which create a system where seeking mental health support is discouraged. Students' reluctance reflects the broader social messages they receive about mental health, making stigma a system-wide issue rather than an isolated personal challenge. This mental health stigma, combined with a lack of positive examples of mental health help-seeking, further discourages students from utilizing available services.

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

The study aimed to explore the drawbacks associated with the perceptions and beliefs on the underutilisation of mental healthcare services at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. A total of five (5) themes emerged as follows: general perceptions on mental health, Perceptions and beliefs about mental health, the impact of mental health, barriers to consultations, mental health services and accessibility and religious and spiritual beliefs in managing mental health. The findings suggest the need for implementing targeted awareness campaigns to reduce stigma, increasing the visibility of services, and fostering a supportive environment (group counselling) that normalizes mental health support. Furthermore, integrating culturally sensitive approaches and peer-support systems could help students feel more comfortable seeking assistance.

CONCLUSION

Mental health is a priority from childhood to adulthood and need to be prioritise. As students continue to navigate their lives and adjust at university, they are faced with many challenges including mental health. There is need for mental health intervention and the university has the right and responsibility to continuously conscientise students to access mental health since there are better benefits in doing so as this will highlight the importance of services and reduce the stigma associated with mental health.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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