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# “Consider our plight”: A cry for help from nyaope users



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## ABSTRACT

Nyaope is a relatively new drug which until recently was not classified as illegal. It is widely used by many young and poor people in predominantly Black townships and users can be easily identified as they usually assemble in open spaces such as parks and taxi ranks and have formed a community through which they support one another in the habit. In addition to this, users often display poor personal hygiene and often resort to stealing and selling stolen goods in order to sustain their habit. There is a paucity of literature on nyaope and its use and impact, and the present study is a qualitative exploration of the experiences of nyaope users in three provinces, namely Gauteng, Mpumalanga and North West. The findings highlight the strong addictive nature of the drug, the ease of access, and the unfavourable social environment which promotes initial use and difficulty in quitting. Nyaope users typically express a desire to find and utilise help in order to overcome their current circumstances.

## ABSTRAK

Nyaope is 'n relatiewe nuwe dwelmmiddel wat algemeen gebruik word deur die meerderheid jong, hoofsaaklik arm mense wat in swart buurte woon. Dit is eers onlangs dat die dwelmmiddel as onwettig geklassifiseer is. Gemeenskappe wat mekaar ondersteun in die gewoonte van die dwelm misbruik kom gewoonlik saam in oop areas in dorps gebiede soos parke en huurmotor staan plekke. Gebruikers kan maklik uitgekene word aan swak persoonlike higiene en die neiging om enigiets te steel om geld te kry om hulle gewoonte te ondersteun. Literatuur oor nyaope, die gebruik daarvan en die impak op die verbruiker is relatief skaars. Hierdie studie was 'n kwalitatiewe eksploratiewe ondersoek oor die ondervindinge van nyaope gebruikers wat uitgevoer is in drie provinsies naamlik Gauteng, Mpumalanga en Noord Wes. Die bevindinge beklemtoon dat nyaope hoogs verslawend en maklik bekombaar is en 'n ongunstige sosiale omgewing dra by tot die gebruik. Nyaope gebruikers is ongelukkig met die toestand waarin hulle hulle bevind en vra vir hulp aangesien hulle dit moeilik vind om die gewoonte op te gee.

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## 1. Introduction

Nyaope is a relatively new designer drug which is commonly used in many Black townships in South Africa. According to several media publications, it emerged in early 2000 in Soshanguve and Mamelodi townships in Pretoria, and over the years many young Black and poor people have become addicted to the drug (Conway-Smith, 2013; Mbanjwa, 2014; Tuwani, 2013). Nyaope is sold in powder form and smoked by rolling it with cannabis. On its own, the long-term effects of cannabis have been linked to a variety of psychiatric disorders (Modisane, 2010). The full composition of nyaope is generally not known, although most agree that heroin is the main ingredient, and rumours of the inclusion of ARVs have been documented (Davis & Steslow, 2014; Grelotti et al., 2014; Thomas & Velaphi, 2014). Reports of rat poison also circulate in many townships and have appeared in several media publications (Venter, 2014). However, the inclusion of these ingredients is yet to be confirmed.

Although the patterns of substance abuse in South Africa have been reported on, there is a dearth of formal studies on nyaope, despite its wide use. Nyaope use and its consequences on the social lives of the users, their families, their communities and the country have been reported mainly by the media, including television documentaries and almost all newspapers in South Africa. There are even views that nyaope may be South Africa's worst drug (Health 24, 2014). The uniqueness of nyaope lies in its demographic popularity in that it is used almost exclusively by Black people (Ghosh, 2013; Ho, 2013). Furthermore, the extent of its addiction is difficult to understand. It is relatively cheap to buy, with an average price of R25 to R30 a joint, and has thus become easily accessible even to primary school children. However, the social cost paid by the users, their families and their communities is very high, due to the severity of the addiction and the intensity of the withdrawal symptoms (Masombuka, 2013).

Factors identified as contributory to drug use include unfavourable social conditions like poverty, unemployment and a lack of recreational facilities (Ramlagan Peltzer & Matseke, 2010; Walton, Blow, Bingham, & Chermack, 2003), and these factors seem to be fuelling the use of nyaope in Black communities (Ghosh, 2013). Although alcohol has been identified as the major substance of abuse and cannabis as the most used illicit drug (Moodley, Matjila, & Moosa, 2012; Ramlagan et al., 2010), anecdotal evidence suggests that in Black townships, nyaope may be the drug most frequently used (Morebudi & Mukhari, 2014). However, there are currently no formal comparative studies to support this view. Nyaope users are easily identified by their poor personal hygiene, their slowness of movement and their half-dazed looks. In townships they are often referred to as “nyaope boys” and are known for resorting to theft in order to sustain their habit (Mbanjwa, 2014).

Nyaope was classified as illegal only in March 2014, with the amendment of the Drugs and Trafficking Act of 2014 (Government Gazette, 2014). Before this amendment, large numbers of dealers and users freely sold and bought nyaope with minimal control and fear of being arrested (Moeng, 2013). However, it is yet to be seen whether the passing of this

legislation will curb the distribution, sale and use of nyaope in the affected communities.

Nyaope is reported to be very addictive and addicts encounter extreme difficulty when attempting to cease using it. There is a lack of drug rehabilitation services in the public sector and the high rates of unemployment result in the available private services being unaffordable, so most of the addicted young people do not have access to rehabilitation services (Ephraim, 2014; Ho, 2013). In addition, high relapse rates of those who have accessed some form of rehabilitation have been reported (Ghosh, 2013; Venter, 2014). The required rehabilitation period is long. At least a full year of intense rehabilitation and family commitment and support are required to successfully rehabilitate a nyaope addict (SANCA Vaal Triangle website, 2014). The situation has become so desperate that some nyaope users even resort to creating their own “rehabilitation” services by locking themselves in a community hall in an effort to separate themselves from the unfavourable social environment which promotes nyaope use (Stuurman, 2014).

Initially, smoking nyaope is reported to make the users feel euphoric and elated, which “high” is followed by feelings of drowsiness and relaxation which are similar to the effects of heroin (Comer, Walker, & Collins, 2005). Continued use is associated with the development of tolerance, and addicts therefore resort to using increasingly greater and more frequent amounts of the drug to achieve the same “high”. Once addicts are dependent upon the drug, they will experience physical pain if they attempt to cease its use. Most of the addicts in the Black townships do not have access to rehabilitation treatment due to their socio-economic situation (Ghosh, 2013). Public rehabilitation centres for substance abuse conditions are scarce, and the waiting lists to be admitted to rehabilitation centres are often long (Myers, Louw, & Fakier, 2008).

The health consequences of nyaope use are not widely known, but Thomas and Velaphi (2014) recently reported the case of two neonates who were born to mothers addicted to nyaope. These babies presented with growth restriction and other signs of neonatal abstinence syndrome, which the authors attribute to nyaope use.

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## 2. Problem statement

Despite the common use of nyaope in many communities, there is dearth of formal studies on the experiences and views of its users. In particular, there is a need to understand the reasons for persistent use of nyaope despite the negative consequences on the quality of life of the users, and what needs to be done to support those that wish to quit nyaope use.

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## 3. Purpose

The purpose of the study was to describe the experiences of nyaope users in several black townships.

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