

Investigating the Potential of Mental Health-Related Podcasts as a Psychoeducational Tool within the Probation Service

Sally Condon and Sharon Lambert*

Summary: This research, undertaken as part fulfilment of a Masters in Applied Psychology (Mental Health), explored the potential for mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool for clients within the Probation Service. While mental health-related podcasts are often used for personal enjoyment, they also offer psychoeducational benefits, particularly for socially excluded populations. The need for alternative forms of support became exacerbated during the global pandemic, COVID-19. During this time, mental health-related podcasts played a fundamental role in providing an alternative way to support people struggling with a range of psychosocial challenges. Today, whilst the restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic are long over, mental health-related podcasts continue to be of benefit to a range of populations.

For the study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with Probation Officers online via Microsoft Teams (N=5). Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Findings indicate an increase in clients' mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviour. Podcasts assisted in establishing a sense of hope and community for probation clients and officers, resulting in a growth in this relationship dynamic. Participants report value in formally incorporating mental health-related podcasts as a resource within the Probation Service. These findings provide evidence of mental health-related podcasts having a positive impact on clients in the Probation Service and among Probation Officers. Future literature should focus on the integration of this psychoeducational tool into similar services.

Keywords: Mental health literacy, psychoeducational tools, mental health-related podcasts, Probation Service, COVID-19.

Introduction

The modern criminal justice system aims to support people with lived experience, with particular focus on reintegration (Webster *et al.*, 2006, cited in

* Sally Condon graduated from University College Cork with a Master's degree in Applied Psychology (Mental Health) (email: condonsally1@gmail.com). Dr Sharon Lambert is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Applied Psychology at University College Cork (email: sharon.lambert@ucc.ie).

Li et al., 2019). This shift, while progressive, faces criticism for potentially undermining victim justice and perpetrator accountability. However, addressing the root cause of criminality is vital for reducing recidivism (Li et al., 2019). To gain a deeper understanding of the roots of criminality, contemporary research has increasingly focused on exploring the ramifications of experiencing childhood in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Noroozi et al., 2018; Ejlskov et al., 2023). Youth growing up in these circumstances face an elevated risk for violence, emotional difficulties and negative peer influences. Additionally, forming negative peer associations plays a crucial role in shaping a young person's involvement in destructive activities, such as substance dependence and criminality (Hesselink and Bougard, 2020).

High levels of interpersonal trauma significantly predict the extent of psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kessler et al., 2010; Tzouvara et al., 2023). Prolonged exposure to childhood adversity can result in complex trauma, altering perception and emotional regulation (Briere and Scott, 2015; Halpin et al., 2022). Difficulty in emotional regulation leads to hypervigilance, whereby non-threatening situations are seen as potential threats. Such exposure can erode a person's sense of safety and trust, reducing the willingness to engage in mental health services (Courtois and Ford, 2012; Liddon et al., 2018). Instead, these emotions become overwhelming, with the person responding by dissociating. Exposure to complex trauma can enforce maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as substance dependency, self-harm or engaging in high-risk behaviours (Kilkelly et al., 2023). Early experiences of trauma can shape attachment styles, impacting on the bond made with others and trust in relationships (Zakaria et al., 2022). Many may struggle with forming secure attachments, leading to difficulties in establishing close and trusting relationships (Bowlby, 1988; Muñoz et al., 2022). Avoidant behaviours may be exhibited to prevent emotional closeness or display anxious behaviours that result from fear of abandonment (Weaver et al., 2020). Negative perceptions about oneself are often internalised, with a person feeling undeserving of success and happiness (Fergusson et al., 1996).

Given that trauma and mental health difficulties are associated with negative later life outcomes, such as criminal activity, addressing these issues must be part of responding to the reduction of crime and recidivism. Mental health literacy promotes efforts to reduce stigma and to foster attitudes that maximise positive mental health outcomes and wellbeing (Sirdifield and Brooker, 2020). It enables individuals to recognise personal challenges, to

make informed decisions and to seek therapeutic support (Furnham and Swami, 2018). Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that many of those within socially excluded populations lack adequate support and access to professional mental health guidance. A poor understanding of mental health has impeded many from seeking therapeutic support and recovery interventions (Goldney *et al.*, 2001, as cited in Furnham and Swami, 2018). Addressing the barriers to seeking help and promoting accessibility to mental health services can facilitate a greater awareness and understanding of the prevalence of mental health issues within these communities. Not only does this aid in increasing mental health literacy, but it also challenges stigmatising beliefs surrounding mental health.

The relationship between trauma, poor mental health literacy and destructive behaviour is multifaceted (Wiechelt and Straussner, 2015). This complex interplay is often observed within the Probation Service. The mission of this service is to deliver high-quality, supervised community sanctions and measures for individuals referred by the justice system, supporting positive change and enhancing community safety (Probation Service). Here, Probation Officers aim to support clients to make positive changes in their lives, while collaborating with other agencies, such as mental health services, to create a comprehensive support system for those under the Probation Service's supervision. Conventionally, the fundamental objective of a probation service was to observe and report behaviours to the court (Probation of Offenders Act, 1907, as cited in McNally, 2007). However, contemporary approaches used today have enabled a diverse range of rehabilitation resources to be made available. Although criminal justice podcasts act as an invaluable tool in facilitating accessible information to marginalised groups, COVID-19 lockdown ignited the emergence of mental health-related podcasts as a potential psychoeducational tool. During that time, the Irish mental health system was under significant strain, resulting in many health organisations, such as the Probation Service, having to respond promptly to this unprecedented situation (McNicholas *et al.*, 2021). The content of mental health-related podcasts focuses on psychological wellbeing, emotional literacy and mental health education. Guests of hosts share lived experiences and coping strategies, all while reducing stigma and supporting mental health self-management (Berry *et al.*, 2021). This research, facilitated by the Probation Service, aims to explore the use of mental health-related podcasts as a supplementary psychoeducational tool within the Probation Service. It is grounded in the recognition that clients often face barriers to accessing

traditional therapeutic services, including stigma, low engagement and systemic pressures. Podcasts, by contrast, offer an accessible, low-cost, and scalable intervention that can be integrated into clients' daily routines. The parameters of the project include assessing the relevance, accessibility and perceived effectiveness of mental health-related podcasts for individuals among this population.

The rise of podcasts has demonstrated the value in psychoeducational content, resulting in an increase in mental health literacy (Ó Caoilte *et al.*, 2023). An increase in podcast engagement has begun to change the nature of service provision, mostly benefiting those who experience social exclusion and face barriers, such as low educational status or low income (Ó Caoilte *et al.*, 2023). In addition, those under probation supervision face significantly more challenges when accessing mental healthcare due to a combination of personal stigma and lack of access to healthcare in general (Power, 2020). Furthermore, the aftermath of COVID-19 has left marginalised groups particularly susceptible to a further decline in mental health, despite the ease of restrictions, highlighting the need for an increased use of psychoeducational tools within service provision (Dale *et al.*, 2021).

Methodology

This study is explorative and investigates the impact of accessibility to mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool, gathering data from Probation Officers who work with this client group. Additionally, the current study aims to provide an interpretive insight into the role of mental health-related podcasts when used within the Probation Service. The study also examines the level of help-seeking behaviour, mental health literacy and willingness to engage in support offered to clients within the service.

Participants and sampling

This study includes five participants, three of whom identified as female, and two identifying as male. Three out of the five participants held the position of Senior Probation Officer, each offering more than fifteen years' experience in the Probation Service. The remaining two participants held a minimum of two years' work experience in their role. As Probation Officers provide an array of support for multiple clients, a rich insight into the probation services can be observed.

Table 1: *Participant profile (Participants referred to as 'P' to ensure anonymity, N=5)*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Length of time working in the Probation Service</i>	<i>Personal interest in podcasts?</i>
P1	Senior Probation Officer	>20 years	Yes
P2	Probation Officer	>2 years	Yes
P3	Senior Probation Officer	>15 years	Yes
P4	Probation Officer	<2 years	Yes
P5	Senior Probation Officer	>20 years	Yes

Data collection

Convenience and non-probability sampling were used to recruit participants who met specific criteria: Probation Officers within the Probation Service, aged 18 or over, with at least one year of experience. Recruiting participants for this study involved contacting various probation services in Ireland via email, and this process was facilitated by the Probation Service. Those who expressed an interest in participating were provided with an information sheet, outlining the research objectives.

Following a semi-structured interview schedule, nine core questions were constructed, supplemented with prepared prompts. Open-ended questions were formulated to enable participants to elaborate on unanticipated topics, ensuring conciseness throughout. Interviews began by introducing general questions about the participants' current work role, along with what they would ordinarily consider as the biggest risk factors for offending. As the interview continued, the direction moved towards the implications of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions on clients, and how the participants confronted these obstacles. Stemming from this, interviewees were asked if they had any personal experience of mental health-related podcasts, and if their clients reported listening to the podcasts during this time. In the latter half of the interviews, participants were asked if they noticed changes in mental health literacy or help-seeking behaviour, if they saw the potential for formally incorporating mental health-related podcasts into the service, and if they had any concerns.

Data analysis

Given the limited literature in this area, Inductive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2023) ensured that the findings were data driven as opposed to preconceived perceptions of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The analytical process began with familiarisation with the collected data. This preliminary step encompassed a thorough review of the interview recordings, making subsequent notes throughout (Clarke *et al.*, 2015). Following this preliminary stage, the initial coding phase began, during which time an extensive scan of the dataset was conducted through line-by-line coding. These codes formed the foundation upon which the corresponding themes and their respective subthemes were delineated.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the ethics committee at the authors' university. Ethical approval was also sought and approved by the Probation Service's research group. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were reminded of this at the beginning of each interview, in addition to be asked to sign a consent form. Participants were reassured that their identity and answers given were to remain anonymous. Data were stored on an encrypted One Drive facilitated by the authors' university, where it is to remain for a minimum of ten years.

Results

Five core themes emerged from the data: Implications of COVID-19 restrictions, Lived Experiences, Accessibility, Psychoeducation, and Potential concerns. Subsequently, each theme consists of corresponding sub-themes (see Table 2).

Implications of COVID-19 restrictions

The onset of the global pandemic, which was declared in 2020, led to a decline in mental health among many people, particularly those in socially excluded populations (Dale *et al.*, 2021). The intensity of lockdown restrictions resulted in the closure of many community-based support structures, such as recovery meetings, and disruption to addiction and mental health services. Those in socially excluded populations, such as people under probation supervision, were particularly affected. In attempts to combat this, Probation Officers

considered alternative ways to provide support for their clients. The subsequent sub-themes outline the predominant challenges and intervention resources used in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Norton, 2020).

Table 2: *Five core themes with corresponding sub-themes*

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
Implications of COVID-19 restrictions	• Presenting challenges • Thinking outside the box
Lived experiences	• A sense of community • A sense of hope
Accessibility	• Language • Easily obtainable
Psychoeducation	• Professional development • Mental health literacy
Potential concerns	• Content quality concerns • Lack of mental health services • Standardisation

Presenting challenges

As with most organisations, the Probation Service had to respond to an unprecedented situation. In response to this, a sense of uncertainty was experienced by participants when remodelling service practices during this period. The disruption to the smooth operation of all community-based services had a detrimental effect on many clients' recovery processes, including increased relapse. Participants recalled clients returning to unhealthy environments, resulting in a significant rise in domestic violence, including a rise in child-to-parent violence:

'My clients weren't able access services to help them cope with uh, the loss of structure to their day, the loss of employment and also then being forced to live in environments usually overcrowded, and where those interpersonal difficulties were exacerbated. We would have seen a huge rise in intimate partner violence during this time, but also domestic violence incidences where child-to-parent violence increased as well.' (P1)

Participants acknowledged the use of over-the-phone support yet recalled the significant disruption in intervention types and client engagement:

‘It really impacted the people who were already in addiction or were fighting with addiction. Like struggles, like, even though they were getting some support over the phone, it just wasn’t the same.’ (P4)

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic left services with a broad range of concerns to address. Participants reported the severity of this challenge, and the significant amount of time clients required to regain a stable mental state:

‘But with COVID-19 certainly with these clients in mind, again, it took them an awful long time even after the restrictions started to lift, before their moods improved, their depression started to lift.’ (P5)

Thinking outside the box

Although this isolation period brought challenges for the Probation Service and people on probation, participants expressed gratitude for the availability of podcasts, an alternative resource used to maintain consistency in clients’ lives. One participant mentioned how she began suggesting mental health-related podcasts due to her own personal interest in the medium:

‘This is how we ended up coming to podcasts because we were all working at home and I suppose that was the thing as well, I heard *Mental Health-related Podcast* and that’s when we started going, I think we’re onto something here. We, you know, we started having these conversations, we had to start thinking outside the box. We had to start thinking about ways of reaching vulnerable people and trying to find supports in not the usual ways and through this, I think, Covid had huge benefits in this area.’ (P3)

The COVID-19 restrictions impacted on the way that services could provide support for their clients. There was a pivot to telehealth and online working tools. In response to this, the participants in this study utilised this challenge to think outside the box and recognised that mental health-related podcasts could become a new resource for their clients,

'I think it was a huge reflection piece for a lot of people, especially for clients, you know, and so I definitely think that COVID-19 was definitely a contributing factor for suggesting these podcasts.' (P2)

Lived experience

All participants viewed podcasts that featured lived-experience stories as an important tool for those in probation services. Gaining an insight into the challenges endured by others has assisted both people under probation supervision and Probation Officers in the challenges of substance recovery, in particular. This theme documents the benefits to both clients and staff, with a sense of community and hope reported.

A sense of community

Facilitating clients with the opportunity to hear others with similar past experiences allows for a magnitude of positive responses, instilling feelings of validation and corroboration: 'There is absolutely no substitute, there's no comparison to hearing something from somebody directly' (P3).

Probation clients identify with others who are real people with similar life experiences, such as trauma, substance dependence and criminality. Hearing from people who are further along their journeys of recovery and desistance provides clients with a rich understanding of their current difficulties and the potential pathways out:

'That's who should be talking, somebody who has lived the drug experience, knows what it's like to really be caught in addiction, and then the struggles and the difficulties with trying to access support.' (P5)

Clients are hearing from people who sound and look like them, who come from similar communities, and a familiarity with the podcast contributors gives clients a sense of belonging and solidarity: 'It's almost like it gives them that sense of community or that they're part of something' (P4).

Participants also recognised a shift in the dynamic of their client-facing relationships, igniting conversations about subjects that the client may not ordinarily have discussed. Through these conversations, a mutual understanding became apparent between participants and their clients: 'We discuss their view of it, how it relates to their circumstances and how it relates to their own mental health and their own story' (P2).

A sense of hope

In addition to creating a sense of community, participants reported that many clients have a renewed sense of hope. For clients undergoing recovery interventions, such podcasts provide hopeful yet candid reports of the challenges that occur in recovery journeys. Through this, the stigma surrounding relapse diminishes, motivating clients to persevere, augmented by first-hand accounts of those who have faltered and succeeded. This candidness, facilitated by recovery and mental health-related podcasts, displays raw and authentic struggles, frequently a feature of substance dependence. Hearing accounts of those who have overcome these obstacles is vital in instilling the idea that recovery is possible:

‘There are other people who are struggling like him, and that it’s OK to struggle like him and that there’s support out there. I think it’s really powerful when people have struggled and then they speak openly and publicly about it, because that gives people hope.’ (P4)

It was reported that podcasts have instilled hope not only for clients within the probation services, but also for the officers themselves. Participants revealed a sense of gratitude and appreciation for the insight gained through listening to these podcasts: ‘It’s almost that I am the one privileged to hear what they share with me on their lives’ (P3).

They appreciate the role hope plays in recovery and the privilege of being trusted with the information from the clients. Subsequent to this, participants are encouraged to persevere and are reminded of the importance of remaining hopeful: ‘You don’t want to diminish or dim somebody else’s light, when actually that’s what gets them up out of the bed in the morning and wanting them to change their ways’ (P1).

Accessibility

The accessibility of mental health-related podcasts adds to their efficiency. Accessibility relates to two factors. In addition to podcasts being easily obtainable and free, they also provide information in an understandable format.

Easily obtainable

Clients are able to access podcasts free of charge. These podcasts can also be accessed in any environment, in private or public, rewinding and pausing whenever the client sees fit, while also, 'I've been able to easily offer this up to my clients and kind of go, you go away and listen to this and then come back and we can have a discussion' (P1).

In addition to this, the most explicit distinction between these podcasts and conventional therapeutic resources is their immediate availability. Some more traditional resources might involve barriers, such as finance, travel, and specific opening hours. These barriers do not exist when accessing podcasts:

'Most people have a phone. That is the one thing that people have as default, so you were able to recommend something that wasn't pie in the sky, that was actually a realistic option for them to tap into.' (P3)

Accessible language

Although many services aim to have plain-language resources available, some may still pose a challenge for many groups, such as those with poor literacy levels. Participants noted the language used in some mental health-related podcasts to be accessible, particularly episodes featuring people with lived experiences:

'I think that that's the beauty of these podcasts. When I started recommending them, it was because it was spoken in their own dialect, in words you can understand, experiences that you've had, and in the middle of it all, extremely positive messages.' (P3)

Participants listed the positive impact on the clients and on themselves. While actively listening to these podcasts, participants reported being reminded of the importance of using lay language and the accessibility it enables. In addition to this, participants also highlighted the importance of maintaining a balance between professional and lay language when working with clients: 'I feel like I need to listen to them as well to be able to meet people at their level without being patronising and condescending' (P1).

Through listening to these podcasts, clients gained confidence to raise challenging topics with their Probation Officers, and participants noted an increase in their confidence to initiate these discussions with clients:

'Sometimes I think there's a fear for clients that's, like, I can't talk about these things, I wouldn't have the words, that's a big thing, you know, sometimes the vocabulary isn't there, and I think by listening to these podcasts and going, well, he's after saying something exactly how I would say it.' (P3)

Psychoeducation

Since introducing mental health-related podcasts to clients, one of the fundamental changes observed, was an increase in psychoeducation. Both Probation Officers and people under probation supervision expanded their knowledge regarding the importance of mental health literacy.

Mental health literacy

Participants highlighted the importance of recognising how trauma has affected their clients. Through mental health-related podcasts, clients were given the opportunity to reflect on stories shared by recoverees. Clients were able to listen at their own pace and reflect on how these topics related to their journey.

""I've been to other groups in the prison before and never got it, but after listening to the podcast I actually get it." So, him being able to say that to me, I think there's a level of honesty and candour that comes with that.' (P1)

Clients began recognising the value of utilising services and openly communicating their needs as they arose. Participants noted a distinct improvement in their clients' confidence regarding expressing personal journeys and recovery aspirations. As a result, a reduction in stigma was observed among clients:

'He ended up sharing stuff with me and ended up going to services and I don't think he would have had the confidence to go before listening because he felt like he couldn't talk about himself.' (P3)

Since introducing these podcasts, participants found clients were more willing to engage and contribute to discussions. A sense of understanding and clarity was noted, as clients felt informed about trauma and how it related to their

personal experience. Participants were encouraged by how clients were able to make self-discoveries and compared this type of experience to a form of self-help:

'I know, obviously, our mental health service, that challenge is there, but there are services out there and so even, like, there's, you know, listening to these for ... you can go on and listen to loads of podcasts that could be of help, almost self-help.' (P4)

Professional development

Participants acknowledged a shift in how they professionally present themselves. Through mental health-related podcasts, participants were able to reflect on their professional approach and its effectiveness. One participant, drawing upon a personal experience, stated that engaging with this medium had reminded her of the importance of perspective and to communicate with clients as a professional, but also as an authentic person:

'I had this lecturer, and I always remember her saying to me, "Don't ever be afraid to show up as a person". Not that you're going to start oversharing. You're still going to have your boundaries and all of that; professional boundaries are very important as well. But I think there shouldn't be such a great divide, and I think these podcasts definitely helped me shift a little bit and just reminded me to be a little bit more human.' (P5)

Additionally, podcasts were able to provide first-hand accounts of journeys from struggles to recovery:

'I think it's not just something that is useful to recommend to clients; it is invaluable as a practitioner, you know. I think the thing with these podcasts is it's just like being a guest in people's lives. It's just giving you a broader view.' (P3)

Participants were able to garner a richer and more personal insight into the experience of substance dependency:

'It's been a positive thing for me as well, you know. It allows me to kind of empathise with their situation and put myself in their shoes and understand it from their perspective, you know.' (P2)

Potential concerns

Participants reported some concern about introducing a medium that focuses on trauma and mental health to socially excluded populations. There were concerns about clients having access to podcasts with questionable or inaccurate information.

Content-quality concerns

Participants were concerned about the quality of information featured in some podcasts and reported that some clients were more susceptible to accepting false or prejudiced information.

Not only can podcasts contain misleading messages, but they also have the power to spread dangerous or harmful content. Participants acknowledged the damage that could be caused through the spread of misinformation. These messages could have a negative influence or even promote self-destructive behaviour:

‘They have the ... I suppose they can spread the inappropriate, dangerous, horrible messages. I think that there’s a risk and a danger there, that I suppose the wrong or incorrect information can be shared.’ (P4)

While it is beneficial for clients to listen to podcasts suggested by these professionals, such recommendations can lead clients to channels that may contain unreliable content. Participants expressed caution about this, fearing their suggestions might lead clients down the wrong path: ‘People don’t listen to podcasts in a vacuum, and people can listen to other podcasts. People can get other sources of information and stuff like that’ (P5).

Lack of services

By listening to mental health-related podcasts, clients’ mental health literacy notably improved. While this is a positive outcome, clients are more aware of the need for therapeutic intervention and the potential consequences of not receiving it.

‘That would be a cautionary note for me, is that when you increase anyone’s literacy in that kind of way, the expectations are raised as well, and, you know, we should be able to match that.’ (P2)

Receiving a diagnosis has little to no benefit if therapeutic support is not offered. If no guidance is offered on how to manage diagnoses, clients resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as substance dependence. With no opportunity to experience new coping strategies, the clients' faith in the system becomes depleted:

'What is the usefulness of having a diagnosis if there's nobody there to help them to put strategies in place to cope with them? The reason why they formed the coping strategies that they have [is] because they've been let down by the system over and over again.' (P1)

Introducing mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool within the Probation Service was described in the main as a positive. However, due to a range of concerns, there was apprehension about potential harms and the need to reduce these risks by introducing organisational protocols. Participants expressed hesitation about regularly suggesting mental health-related podcasts to clients. One participant compares the medium to the 'Wild West', stating that there is little to no regulation in place to monitor content. Participants have become more reluctant to recommend different podcasts because of this ambivalence:

'I know it's like the Wild West. There are no rules as such, which, in one way, allows for quite a creative and positive space, but on the other hand it, you know, we have to be very wary of what podcast we would suggest people listen to.' (P5)

In large organisations such as the Probation Service, maintaining flexible and creative client work is essential and podcasts certainly accommodate this creativity. Nonetheless, participants began highlighting the need for standardisation: 'I don't want to recommend something then that potentially is something I shouldn't be recommending if there is that risk there as well' (P4).

Participants agreed that standardisation might assist in reducing the level of engagement in channels where biases are reinforced, and misinformation is spread: 'There's a fear that, you know, that people could go down rabbit holes or the fear that it could do more damage than not' (P5).

Accumulating a list of appropriate mental health-related podcasts would provide Probation Officers with a starting point. Participants proposed that by allocating specific podcasts that have been approved by the Service, more Probation Officers would be inclined to suggest the medium:

'If there was a specific set of podcasts, then that would be very beneficial 'cause you know that the information being provided would be very structured and carefully thought out.' (P2)

Other participants proposed creating an online portal, where clients or staff could access podcasts relating to trauma, substance dependence and recovery interventions. Participants perceived this as being particularly beneficial for igniting conversations within their offices and amongst staff members. By generating these conversations, not only are clients provided with accurate information, but Probation Officers are given the opportunity to enhance their professional development further:

'I think this is where you can use the portal, like, I think every week why can't you say, oh, this is a really good podcast – we're recommended seeing this? Or you listen to this one for addiction, for mental health, for young people and then because ... but also that means it's gonna start conversations in the office because there's a lot of people who won't recommend them because the people still don't listen to podcasts themselves.' (P4)

'The Probation Service should certainly look at having kind of training days or in-service days where Probation Officers say, listen, it's OK to use these, you know, use these as jump points to generate discussion with your clients and stuff like that.' (P5).

Discussion

The objective of this research study was to explore the potential role of mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool within the Probation Service. The use of mental health-related podcasts in this context surged during the global pandemic, COVID-19. With lockdown restrictions negatively impacting on the mental health of 74 per cent of individuals aged 18 to 34, alternative client support was needed to tackle this unprecedented situation (Dale *et al.*, 2021; Central Statistics Office, 2023). It must be noted that, while the global pandemic played a role in the increased use of mental health-related podcasts in this context, participants identified COVID-19 as a contributing factor in, rather than the sole catalyst for, its integration into the service.

In addition to this medium addressing concerns raised by the pandemic, results indicate that mental health-related podcasts continue to be of benefit for probation clients. This sample supports the potential value of this medium in the Probation Service as instrumental in tackling barriers associated with service access. This study highlights the pivotal role played by mental health-related podcasts as a form of self-help for clients. In light of service-provision gaps, and unforeseen circumstances, participants found solace and comfort in this medium. These findings are consistent with contemporary research conducted by Ó Caoilte *et al.* (2023), in which results support mental health-related podcasts, along with private counselling, as the most preferred option in terms of enhancing mental health awareness (Tobin and Guadagno, 2022, cited in, Ó Caoilte *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, Ó Caoilte *et al.* (2023) highlight a clear distinction in the motivations for podcast listenership. It was reported that individuals with lower socio-economic backgrounds found educational value in mental health-related podcasts, while those with higher educational attainment listened to podcasts for entertainment purposes. These findings correlate with the present sample, noting that participants initially began listening to podcasts for personal entertainment, yet discovered the potential use for their clients. These first-hand accounts encompass the reality of criminality, trauma and substance dependency, gradually improving clients' mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviour.

Evidently, mental health-related podcasts also contributed to an increase in Probation Officers' mental health literacy. Through listening to mental health-related podcasts, both Probation Officers and their clients shared a notable appreciation for the content featured in this medium. Additionally, results suggested that participants felt there was value in formally incorporating this tool into the Probation Service. The data reported in this study provide compelling arguments to support mental health-related podcasts being a valuable psychoeducational resource, particularly for clients under probation supervision who may exhibit poor mental health literacy or help-seeking behaviour (Noroozi *et al.*, 2018; Hesselink and Bougard, 2020). Participants reported clients exhibiting a heightened interest and deeper connection when podcast creators or guests shared their own personal journeys. The podcasts facilitated an outlet for self-actualisation and acceptance, an experience which was unfamiliar to those with negative peer associations. This suggests that there is an opportunity to build upon mental health awareness among those with poor mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviour.

Traditional concepts of masculinity, often entwined with rigid gender norms, have been responsible for propagating violence among socially excluded populations. A study conducted by Ó Caoilte *et al.* (2023) highlights the enormous benefits offered by mental health-related podcasts, specifically for individuals identifying as male. This is particularly pertinent in light of the fact that a considerable 57 per cent of males have experienced physical assault by other males and related offences (Central Statistics Office, 2023). Furthermore, incidents of sexual offences are reported later by males, in comparison to their female counterparts. This particular observation accentuates the complexity of male experiences with violence, and their potential hesitancy in seeking help or disclosing such incidents to authorities. The value of mental health-related podcasts for men appears to become more pronounced, providing a discreet and accessible platform to address not only the consequences of violence but also the underlying societal factors that contribute to these disparities.

Using this medium as a tool to combat mental health illness could also be explored as a strategy for pre-empting mental health emergencies. By broadening the use of mental health-related podcasts, mental health concerns could be identified and addressed quicker than formal services, preventing the concern from escalating. Contemporary research builds on the concept of neutralisation (Matza and Sykes, 1957), whereby experiencing trauma from authoritative figures excuses criminality or destructive behaviour, creating a divide between professionals and their clients. It can be difficult for clients to redefine these preconceived perceptions about authoritative figures, thus deeming relationship quality with Probation Officers essential in the recovery process (Courtois and Ford, 2012; Liddon *et al.*, 2018). The enhanced awareness facilitated by this medium plays a pivotal role in reshaping the dynamic between Probation Officers and their clients, with results indicating that the podcasts have been fundamental in breaking down barriers. By presenting different concepts and narratives in an accessible and relatable manner, these podcasts served as a common ground for communication, bridging the gap between Probation Officers and clients.

Although participants unmistakably expressed the desire for integrating such podcasts into the Probation Service, it must be acknowledged that discussion of the feasibility of implementing this medium raises pertinent considerations. Among these is the monitoring of content quality, whereby content should be vetted prior to being implemented as a psychoeducational tool. Furthermore, findings reveal a significant sense of uncertainty regarding

the spread of misinformation. In order to combat ambiguities surrounding the use of mental health-related podcasts in this setting, strategies must be devised. Participants showed a particular interest in standardisation, whereby a compilation of Probation Service-approved mental health-related podcasts would be made available. Not only would this ensure that the content was vetted, but it would also ensure that each podcast aligned with the ethos of the Probation Service. By devising a reliable and accessible resource, more Probation Officers might be encouraged to suggest mental health-related podcasts to their clients (Goldney et al., 2001, cited in Furnham and Swami, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study provides evidence of the value of mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool within the Probation Service. Mental health-related podcasts offer a unique and effective platform for delivering psychoeducational content to a diverse audience of Probation Officers and people under probation supervision. The exploratory nature of this study contributes to innovative approaches to addressing mental health challenges in health organisations.

Potentially, this is still an area of exploration

Rehabilitation groups, foster-care services and homeless shelters are just a few areas that could benefit enormously from this psychoeducational tool, potentially reducing stigma around these socially excluded populations. Exploring the use of this resource in these areas could be considered. However, in saying this, it is important to note that some caution should be taken around monitoring the quality of podcast content. This is particularly essential when target audiences include those with low educational attainment, in which these individuals tend to be more susceptible to believing false information. The spread of bias or incorrect information can be immensely damaging for those in vulnerable populations. To ensure appropriate and safe content, organisations must suggest podcasts that have undergone standardisation and content monitorisation. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the integration of new media forms presents an opportunity to overcome conventional barriers and reach a wider audience. In sum, the deployment of mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool in the Probation Service not only aligns with contemporary shifts in learning preferences, but

also holds the potential to bridge existing gaps in mental health support. As an adaptable and engaging medium, podcasts offer a dynamic channel for knowledge dissemination and support, redefining mental health awareness and intervention within the Probation Service.

The participants eligible for this research were exclusively Probation Officers associated with the Probation Service. It is noteworthy that all the individuals taking part in this study demonstrated a pre-existing interest in podcasts, listening to episodes for personal enjoyment. Therefore, this is a very self-selecting group of participants who may have a positive bias. Given the potential positive bias stemming from the participants' existing interest, future research should strive to recruit a more diverse and inclusive participant group. In addition to this, all participants were residing in Ireland and have experience working only with the Probation Service. Increasing inclusivity would allow for diverse perspectives on the potential benefits of mental health-related podcasts in this context. Analysing different perspectives would enable a more impartial and comprehensive evaluation of the role of mental health-related podcasts within this setting. This approach would ensure a robust analysis, drawing insights from multiple perspectives, refining our understanding of the medium's impact in this setting.

Future literature should conduct an in-depth exploration of the implications associated with incorporating this medium into various stages of the supervision journey within the Probation Service. There is an opportunity to investigate whether attitudes towards this medium evolve across different phases of recovery, or whether clients exhibit a higher inclination to engage during stages of this process. Delving into these aspects would shed light on the nuanced dynamics between the medium's effectiveness and the varying progress stages of individuals under probation, contributing valuable insights to the field.

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