

The Impact of Online Education on the Mental Health of University Students

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ABSTRACT

A major change that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought is the transition to online education. This study aims to investigate the impact that online education has had on the mental health of university students. The participants in the study were chosen through snowball sampling and were given a list of statements in a questionnaire. They had to rate the statements on a Likert Scale ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree'. The results suggest that there has been a significant impact on the students' mental health due to online education wherein they are experiencing mental fatigue, demotivation, disinterest, and even physical symptoms like headaches.

Keywords: *Online Education, Mental Health, Pandemic, Classroom Lectures, Social Support, Fatigue, Demotivation, Procrastination, Anxious*

The SARS COVID-19 pandemic has been one with numerous repercussions for the entire world. For children it has meant shutting down of schools with no means of physical activity, also called 'play time'. For teenagers and young adults it has led to a shutdown of universities which has meant no outlet to socialize and have a 'campus life'. For working adults, it has meant a shutdown of workplaces leading to no 'office life'. For stay-at-home adults, it has increased the pressures of domestic work since entire families have had to quarantine in their respective homes during the lockdowns.

While a lot of things have shut down during this time, one thing that has continued its operation is education. The physical mode of education in classrooms has been replaced by the online mode of education which comes with attending a lecture while sitting on one's bed. This shift in the mode of education may have had several impacts on the students' physical and mental health. As a fellow university student pursuing psychology, it is a question of interest to investigate the impact on mental health of university students. Hence, the aim of this research is to investigate the impact of online education on the mental health of university students.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been several researches on the impact of online education on students' mental health since the start of the pandemic.

A research done in 2021 aimed to find the impacts of COVID-19 and online education amongst students in Pakistan (Khawar et al., 2021). A questionnaire was distributed amongst 2220 students in several universities that were hosting online classes for their students. It was found that the distress came up to 45% and the dissatisfaction from online classes came up to 65% in university students (Khawar et al., 2021). The relationship between the distress and satisfaction was also investigated. The results indicated that the more distress the students were in, the less likely it was for them to be satisfied with online classes (Khawar et al., 2021). This study can only be generalized to the students of urban Pakistan as that was the sample used. Hence, it lacks in generalizability of other regions.

Likewise, Syahputri et. al. (2020) conducted a study on 140 university students in Indonesia to find out the psychological effects of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Syahputri et al., 2020). They collected the data in a qualitative manner on seven parameters: fatigue, headaches and other physical pain, demotivation, withdrawal and procrastination, bad time management, feeling isolated, uncertainty to what the lecturers explain during class. 100% students indicated that they feel fatigue and physical pain in their eyes, shoulders and heads. 98.6% students indicated that they struggle with time management. 95% students indicated that they were uncertain about what the lecturer explains during class. 68.6% students indicated that they felt isolated from their classmates (Syahputri et al., 2020). This gives us an insight into the different psychological impacts that university students have been facing due to online education in the pandemic.

Getting to know about such psychological impacts, it is now a question of curiosity why these occur; what is the root of such distress.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown that came with it brought along restrictions on interacting with people. These restrictions are especially hard for humans as humans are social beings. The connectivity and the interactions between humans enable them to form relationships with one another. Hence, shutdown of public spaces meant for group gatherings meant that human interactions got limited to interacting with just one's family at home. A study conducted by Williams et. al. (2020) investigated the effect of social distancing and the restrictions put during lockdown (Williams et al., 2020). The results showed that the domain of emotional wellbeing was impacted the most due to social distancing. Having financial losses, reduced social association, and changing one's daily routine brought along reduced motivation and self-esteem (Williams et al., 2020).

Another study in the US with 683 participants focused on the impact of lockdown on young people. It was found that after two weeks of lockdown, young people experienced greater anxiety than usual. They also revealed that more than the restrictions on social interaction, the act of being told not to do something, put a lot of burden on them (Oosterhoff et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Sampling Strategy

Snowball sampling will be used in this study. This type of sampling strategy refers to when a few subjects are contacted to take part in the study and then refer their own contacts to be a

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part of the study. Also known as a non-probability sampling technique, this strategy recruits its subjects on a non-random basis, wherein everyone in the population does not have the same chance of being selected. Snowball sampling will be used to get as many subjects to participate in the study as possible.

Participants

A total of 74 subjects will be surveyed. The target population is students over the age of 18, pursuing a degree in a university through an online medium. Students from any university and any country can be contacted, as this will enable for a holistic perspective on online education.

Research Design

The study will be conducted through an online self-report questionnaire. The online means will be used due to logistical issues as the pandemic is still on the surge. The subjects are also more likely to feel comfortable and less receptive if the questionnaire is provided online, since the topic in focus is rather a sensitive one.

Procedure

Students from different universities will be contacted through personal connections. They will also be asked to circulate the questionnaire to as many other students as possible in order to get an ample number of responses. Subjects who will show interest in the study will be asked to give consent once they open the questionnaire and will be explained the exact aim of the study in a clear and concise manner. The consent form will also make it clear that they have the right to leave the study at any point. They will not be asked to reveal their names so that this anonymity can assure their privacy. They will also be assured that their responses will remain confidential. Once they consent to taking part in the study, they can proceed with responding to the various statements presented to them.

RESULTS

Data Analysis

Table No. 1

| SR | Questions | Responses (%) | | | | |
|----|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| | | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 1. | Online Education is easier than classroom lectures | 1 | 18 | 19 | 38 | 24 |
| 2. | I learn more through online classes than classroom lectures | 0 | 8 | 15 | 34 | 43 |
| 3. | It has been an easy transition from classroom lectures to online classes | 1 | 16 | 27 | 30 | 26 |
| 4. | My home | 16 | 28 | 24 | 25 | 16 |

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| SR | Questions | Responses (%) | | | | |
|-----|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| | | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| | environment allows me to attend online classes without any disturbance | | | | | |
| 5. | I feel frustrated with online education | 26 | 31 | 22 | 14 | 7 |
| 6. | I am losing interest in what I am learning | 26 | 32 | 15 | 18 | 9 |
| 7. | Online education is fun | 0 | 4 | 32 | 34 | 30 |
| 8. | I feel anxious due to online education | 11 | 27 | 28 | 28 | 7 |
| 9. | I am confident about my grades | 3 | 26 | 24 | 31 | 16 |
| 10. | I interact and keep up with my friends everyday | 4 | 30 | 14 | 32 | 20 |
| 11. | I feel that I have the same amount of social support | 5 | 11 | 31 | 31 | 22 |
| 12. | I feel lonely | 24 | 22 | 26 | 19 | 9 |
| 13. | I am satisfied with online education | 0 | 3 | 35 | 35 | 27 |
| 14. | I feel motivated to do my work on time | 1 | 18 | 18 | 27 | 36 |
| 15. | I feel motivated to participate in online classes | 4 | 5 | 23 | 32 | 35 |
| 16. | I am able to pay attention on academic and non-academic work | 1 | 22 | 28 | 24 | 24 |
| 17. | I am confident about my future | 1 | 18 | 27 | 36 | 18 |
| 18. | I worry about my academics | 31 | 36 | 20 | 12 | 0 |
| 19. | I feel stressed when attending online classes | 19 | 28 | 26 | 23 | 4 |

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| SR | Questions | Responses (%) | | | | |
|-----|---|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| | | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| | than classroom lectures | | | | | |
| 20. | I find myself procrastinating more now than before | 31 | 31 | 25 | 11 | 3 |
| 21. | I have more headaches now than before | 28 | 24 | 27 | 15 | 5 |
| 22. | I often feel mental fatigue | 34 | 38 | 15 | 9 | 4 |
| 23. | I am able to manage my time well | 4 | 16 | 31 | 30 | 19 |
| 24. | I am able to finish my work on time / It is easy to meet deadlines | 8 | 23 | 28 | 30 | 11 |
| 25. | It is easy to fall asleep at night | 4 | 14 | 24 | 30 | 28 |
| 26. | I engage in activities that I enjoy (listening to music, watching a movie, dancing, singing, painting, playing games, etc.) | 9 | 41 | 26 | 18 | 7 |
| 27. | I am worried about my physical health | 41 | 35 | 5 | 12 | 7 |
| 28. | I am worried about my mental health | 38 | 28 | 19 | 12 | 3 |

DISCUSSION

The onset of online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a huge factor in the continuum in a student's education. Though it has meant maintenance in one's path of education, it has also posed several impacts on their mental health. The aim of this research study was to investigate how online education has been impacting the mental health of university students. The university students contacted in this study belonged to a wide range of countries including India, Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada, United States, Brunei and United Kingdom.

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The findings of the questionnaire indicate that online education has played a role in adding distress to university students. This distress has occurred in many forms. To begin with, 38% of the respondents have disagreed and 24% have strongly disagreed that online education is easier than classroom lectures. This indicates that students still have a preference for in-person classes and not for online classes. 43% of the respondents have strongly disagreed and 34% have disagreed that they learn more through online education. This can be because of the transition from in-person to online education being hard as 56% respondents have disagreed and strongly disagreed that to them finding the transition easy. 57% have agreed and strongly agreed that they find online education frustrating. 58% have even felt that they are losing interest in the field that they are pursuing.

Most of the respondents feel that online education is not fun. 34% disagreed and 30% strongly disagreed to when they were asked if online education is fun. An activity being unpleasurable can mean that they are more likely to face negative feelings about it and losing interest while performing it. Something that can help to make the process fun is human interaction. 52% of the respondents revealed that they did not interact with their friends on a daily basis, which can be one of the factors in making online education not enjoyable. Some may argue that social support can include the support of one's family. However, 53% of the respondents felt that they did not have the same amount of social support as before. This indicates that friends and peers play a crucial role in strengthening one's social livelihood.

It should also be noted that students are not only finding online education not fun, but also unsatisfactory. 62% of the respondents denied that they were satisfied with online education, while 35% were neutral about it. 47% of them feel stressed when attending online classes as compared to in-person classroom lectures. This is an indicator that the online mode of learning is playing a significant role in the deteriorating mental health of university students. The responses about one's environment being a disturbance were quite balanced. 44% felt that they were able to attend online classes without any disturbances, while 41% felt that they were not able to do so. This could be due to the sample of the study being urban centric. The urban population was able to continue their education via the online medium with far less difficulty as compared to the rural population. Most of the students in the rural population were not able to continue their education during lockdown because of the lack of resources. The abundant resources owned by the urban population gave them access to spaces and gadgets through which they could attend online lectures without much trouble. In addition, 50% of them revealed that they were able to exercise their hobbies such as art, music, dance, gaming, etc., while 25% disagreed. This could be due to people getting more time for themselves and their families to perform the activities that they had missed out on due to work. This added time aided in tapping back to reminding oneself what they enjoy doing and performing them for pleasure.

This study took place during a pandemic, which might be a limitation. During a lockdown in a pandemic, one is confined to the four walls of their house. The distress from the rising COVID-19 cases, death of loved ones, limited social interaction, limited use of social spaces, could all be at a high and can be contributing factors to the responses obtained during this time. This is indicated in their response about having anxiety due to online classes. 38% agreed while 35% disagreed. It can be deduced that online education could be a contributor to one's anxiety, but cannot account for the entirety of it. Other factors described above could be leading to one feeling anxious.

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However, the statements presented to them did inquire them about online education in a clear and concise way. Not only did they provide an insight into their mental health, but also the impacts that it is having on their day to day life.

This impact on mental health can hamper one's motivation. 63% of the respondents felt that they felt demotivated to do their work on time. 67% are not even motivated to participate in class. Not only motivation, but one's attention can also be impacted. The respondents indicated that 48% of them found it difficult pay attention on academic and non-academic work. The rates of procrastination have also increased as 62% of the participants felt that they were procrastinating more now than before. Many students are now struggling with time management due to their commitments at home or feelings of procrastination. 49% of the respondents in our study felt that they are unable to manage their time well, another 31% being neutral. An unhealthy head space can also impact one physically in the form of headaches, insomnia, cardiovascular diseases, etc. 52% of the respondents felt that they experienced more headaches now as compared to before. 72% even indicated that they feel mental fatigue. The duration and quality of sleep also gets impacted. 58% of the respondents disagreed when asked if it is easy to fall asleep at night.

When thinking about the future, 54% of the respondents worry about it. This feeling of worrying is another factor that is causing an unsound mind. 67% of the respondents revealed that they worry about their academics. The subjects were also asked if they worry about their physical and mental health. 76% of them responded with having worry of physical health and 64% of them responded with having worry of mental health. The last two statements were included to check whether worrying about physical and mental health is independent of them actually being healthy physically and mentally. It is shown that it does not matter whether one is physically and mentally healthy to be able to predict the amount of worry. One worries about both physical and mental health, which may have heightened negative effects on both.

CONCLUSION

The impact that online education has had on the mental health of university students has been quite significantly negative. The students have found the online mode more difficult than the in-person mode of education. The online mode is being found unenjoyable and the students have less social support from their friends and peers. Feelings of frustration, disinterest, stress, demotivation and worry were elicited due to online education. Students found it hard to pay attention in class and procrastinated on their work. It is hard for them to fall asleep easily, which might be an indicator of their mental fatigue.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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