Tertiary Education Students' Learning Experience During the COVID-19 Outbreak

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Online learning is commonly used nowadays for several aspects as an advanced form of learning, through hi-tech gadgets. However, as convenient and efficient it sounds, some students find it difficult to cope with online learning. The goal of the current study is to answer the research questions of "What is experienced by students in an online learning environment?" and "Does online learning environment experience improve/hinders/maintains academic achievements?" via an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). 16 participants were interviewed and the data obtained were analyzed through the IPA, illustrated four superordinate themes which are, the dynamics of online learning, significance of lecturers in quality of online learning, effects of environment of online learning and effects on self, due to online learning. The impact of online learning during the COVID -19 pandemic have indeed impacted tertiary student's perception of education, their mental health well-being and their academic performance. This highlights the need to develop ways to overcome this situation and ensure quality education can still be delivered and received.

Keywords: tertiary education, COVID-19, mental health, academic performances, online learning

The Coronavirus disease 2019, COVID-19, is a novel pneumonia disease that originated from Wuhan, China (Shah, A., Safri, S., Thevadas, R., Noordin, N., Rahman, A., & Sekawi, Z. et al., 2020). Due to the rapid spread of the virus, the Malaysian government initiated a Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18th of March 2020, to act as circuit breaker to curb infections and to avoid new clusters from forming. As part of the newly imposed rules, amongst others, public places and institutions of higher learning were ordered to close temporarily. Due to this, the Ministry of Education was forced to switch to online learning environment almost overnight to ensure the continuation of education across the country.

Online learning is essentially a virtual distance education that is conducted over the internet. As a virtual learning environment may provide several advantages to students, such as, flexible and favorable time and studying environment (Nyguen, 2017), it also may bring inconveniences to students, like mental overloads and distress (Tognazzini, L., Zorn, S., & Austin, T., 2016). Students' lives can be impacted as their psychological well-being can be influenced by several factors induced by the pandemic (Visvanathan, N., Rahman, M. N. A., & Muhamad, A. S., 2021).

According to an article by Arumugam (2020), the president of Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities (MAPCU), Datuk Parmjit, stated that students have difficulties adapting to the online learning dynamics and environment. However, the younger generation is known for being more

comfortable with using technology and the virtual environment, due to online activities and the availability hi-tech gadgets. This directs to an argument of 'Do students really have bad experiences and difficulties in adapting to the online learning environment?'. The research questions of this study would be, 1. What are experienced by students in an online learning environment? 2. Does online learning environment experience improve/hinder/maintains academic achievement? Hence, the purpose of this study is to discover the effects of online learning on students' academic performance and mental health during the pandemic.

Literature Review

Online learning is not a new method of learning as this type of learning method is the primary mode used in distance learning. Students intentionally chose online learning when they opt for distance learning. However, the current COVID-19 situation has forced students to undergo education via the online learning method. The experiences of students being suddenly put into a new learning environment may not be the same as someone who intentionally made the decision to study via the online learning method. Furthermore, crisis such as The COVID 19 pandemic has shown to induce psychological problems such as stress, anxiety, fear, insomnia, depression and many more. In students, this can impact their learning process negatively. For example, they may lose focus, get easily frustrated and lose interest to learn, especially when classes become less interactive as previously was when student were in campus (Dhawan, 2020).

Thus, online learning and teaching should be conceptualized more vastly based on ecological perspectives as well, as students' interaction pattern and not solely depend on the characteristics of online components (Cho, Y., Choi, H., Shin, J., Yu, H., Kim, Y., & Kim, J., 2015).

Looking back at literature, online learning provides many benefits to students such as more flexibility in terms of time, increased accessibility where students can attend classes from anywhere and students can have a more conducive learning environment due to this (Nguyen, 2017). Students can also engage to extensive networks of students, not restricted by geographical boundaries (Gautam, 2020). With the support of appropriate technology, gadgets and network, student to student interaction in the learning environment increases efficiency through online forums and discussions (Elfaki, N., Abdulraheem, I., & Abdulrahim, R., 2019).

On the contrary, online learning environment also has shown to have negative impacts and causes negative effect on the students' academic achievements compared to those who attended traditional classes (Bir, 2019). Excessive use of technology can lead to mental overload, reduced consciousness and concentration, and disconnect students from their surroundings, which leads to academic performance being affected more than any other factor (Halupa, 2016). The lack of being in the presence of peers can also result in students developing a sense of isolation (Gautam, 2020). The absence or decrease in social connection may lower students' satisfaction level and affect their desire to seek help from their classmates, which creates a weak sense of being connected in their learning community (Kuong, 2015). When student's sense of belongingness is not fulfilled, then finding motivation to achieve becomes a challenge (Gillen-ONeel, 2019).

In order to avoid the negative consequences of online learning and increase student satisfaction, lecturers need to be competent in delivering content efficaciously, have access and use multiple resources (Rahman, N., Hussein, N., & Aluwi, A., 2015). The

quality of online learning is measured via student's cognitive engagement, that is reflected in their online written discussions and online participation. Again, instructors has a vital role to monitor and support both online participation and discussions by students to further lead students in higher level cognitive engagement (Shukor, N., Tasir, Z., Van der Meijden, H., & Harun, J., 2014).

Furthermore, learning institutions are responsible to design an effective learning support system which aids in encouraging students to develop independent learning culture using a various methods and suitable technologies involving study groups, capacity building of students, provision of various kinds of learning and support services for students, while utilizing technology (Trung, N., Thu, T., & Tan, L., 2012). Institutions also have the responsibility to utilize various online tools to create an efficient and more effective learning environment for students (Dhawan, 2020). This has the potential to vastly improve student learning experiences.

Omar ,Hassan and Atan, (2012) have suggested that e-mentoring can influence student's attitude in online learning environment. Some learners may be lost without instructors' assistance and guidance. Therefore, teachers and instructors need build a good relationship with their students to increase their participation in online learning (Omar, N., Hassan, H., & Atan, H., 2012). In addition, it was found that personal attention is a great issue in online learning, as students expects two-way interaction with their instructors, which is harder to implement in online learning environment, especially with limited sources and platforms (Dhawan, 2020). This may not only potentially decrease student's interest in learning but also hinder their academic performance (Song et al., 2004, as cited in Dhawan, 2020).

If higher learning institutions plan to continue online learning, they should consider factors such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, cognitive absorption, internet and computer self-efficacy, service quality, system quality, external influences and lecturer competence (Ismail, N., Razak, M., Zakariah, Z., Alias, N., & Aziz, M.,2012; Alias, N., Zakariah, Z., Ismail, N., & Aziz, M., 2012). Thus, this research aims to explore student's experiences in the e-learning space to understand the impact of this sudden shift.

Method

Participants

This study consists of a sample of 16 participants, 7 males and 9 females, aging 18 years and above, studying in private universities around the Subang area, Malaysia. Purposive sampling method was used as participants were required to attain criteria, like, being an active tertiary education student during the pandemic and experiencing online learning for at least one full semester. Personal and identifiable information were not collected and participants were named after characters in the DC Comics to safeguard the confidentiality of the participants throughout the research. All participation in this study is completely voluntary and are allowed to withdraw from the research, any time throughout the study.

Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants as a method of data collection. The questions that were generated focuses on the dynamics, effectiveness and experiences of students' online learning experiences amidst the pandemic. As the sharing of personal experiences may be influenced by the presence of people in a group, a one-to-one interview method was opted. 10 open-ended questions were constructed, for

participants to further elaborate on their perception, absorption, application and experiences of online learning during the pandemic, without any restrictions.

Data Analysis

The Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) was chosen to analyze the data obtained, as it analyzes the data in depth and thoroughly. Thus, it would enable us to obtain detailed analysis on participant's personal experiences, especially in the context of complex and subjective topics, such as impact and effects of online learning on students' academic performance and mental health during the pandemic. The transcripts of the participants were coded and analyzed for themes. The themes that were formed were then analyzed, contrasted and compared to observe and gain a pattern that represents the data obtained. Four super-ordinate themes were obtained along with emerging sub-ordinate themes.

Results

After analyzing the data obtained, four superordinate themes and sixteen sub themes were found as shown in Table 1

Table 1

Themes and sub themes, the result of IPA on students' learning experience during the pandemic

Theme	Sub Theme
1. The dynamics of online learning	• Structure of the course • Complexity of subjects • Conveniences of online learning • Resources
2. The significance of lecturers in quality of online learning	• Importance of timely feedback • Poor support from lecturers • The effects of supervision on concentration • Inconsistencies and inconsideration of lecturers
3. The effects of environment	• The importance of human interaction • Impact of internet connection on online learning quality • Influence of distractions or comfort in concentration • Effects of environment on academic performance
4. Effects of stress on self, due to online learning	• Factors of distress • Disruption in routines • Experiences of physical discomfort • Influence on socializing and social connectivity

The dynamics of online learning

Several participants expressed their opinions and experiences that were influenced by the structure of their courses. A number of them feel that even when there is a lot of accessibility and availability, the lack of proper structure to be inconvenient, especially in terms of time restrictions, recorded lectures and complexity of subjects.

> *"Well, in terms of availability, or accessibility, because (um) judging based on my, on me, is that I already have electronic devices that can connect to my classes and so forth. But, it's a bit confusing because it'll be less organized"* (Aquaman)

> *"...then there are classes where I'm scoring so low for a class that I would have done really well if I was in physical class."* (Mera)

Meanwhile, in context of conveniences, some also stated that online classes boosted their performance due to the availability of recorded lectures and access to countless resources.

> *"Because I could go back to the recordings, and watch the lecture again, whereby in traditional learning, you can't watch the lecture again."* (Aquaman)

The significance of lecturers in quality of online learning

Factors such as timely feedback, support, supervision, consistency and consideration from lecturers plays vital roles in students' academic journey. The delay of feedback from lecturers influences the work progress and information obtained by participants. This also affects the comprehension of students in their subjects which may hinder their academic performance.

> *"...there you can ask questions then and there, and you get a direct answer, unlike online, we have to wait for the lecturer to get a reply. Cause by the time you get an actual answer, you just lose track of everything."* (Batman)

The lack of support, along with inconsistencies and inconsideration of lecturers has significant impact on students' learning experiences.

> *"The lecture wouldn't help us a lot because it is online and also when we join our classes and if we accidentally get disconnected, we lose our attendance."* (Superman).

> *"I feel like it's bundling up like they are giving more. And they want us to do more, because they think that just because we are at home, we are freer."* (Raven).

However, it was also found that supervision on students by lecturers has direct influence on the concentration rate of students during classes.

The effects of environment

The findings highlight the vitalness of humanly interaction among students during learning period. It was noted that participants feel unhuman and disconnected from their course mates, as well as finding online learning ineffective due to lack of interaction. This can also be associated with the impact of internet quality on their learning experience, as interruptions in connectivity is a major downfall in online classes. Moreover, distractions or comfort in the environment is stated to affect concentration rate and academic performances of students.

> *"Yeah, definitely, I would say because it gives that extra touch. Makes me feel like human. Right now, I just feel like an anime character in front of my screen"* (Katana).

> *"You might not know when it crashes, when will slow down and like what I say you might tend to miss out the points where your lecturer is speaking."* (Robin)

Effects of stress on self, due to online learning

According to findings, multiple forms of distress pressures students into attempting various steps to meet deadlines and achieve good grades. This led students to face their gadget screens for long hours continuously, disconnecting them from their surroundings

and often results in mental overload and multiple physical discomforts.

> *"...the submissions are like back-to-back and we have like, every week we have like a quiz or a test for certain subjects and, and you know, the submissions were like, if you miss, like two minutes, then you cannot submit your work."* (Mera).

> *"Compared to physical classes, I get more tired. The fatigue is really there. And then (uhm) the body pain, sitting in one place for more than a few hours..."* (Catwoman)

Discussion

In this research, four superordinate themes were established and focused on: 1) dynamics of online learning, 2) significance of lecturers, 3) effects of environment and 4) effects of stress on self, due to online learning.

According to a study by Rahman et al. (2015), students' satisfaction is linked to factors such as course structure. Several participants find the lack of structure to be inconvenient, time consuming and unbeneficial, while some favors the flexibility and conveniences that the structure offers them. Not all subjects are suitable and tailored to be conducted via online classes, which also affects the comprehension rate of students. This potentially leads to dissatisfaction and distress, as information quality influences the desire of continuation of online learning which may hinder academic achievements or performances of students, as lack of interest and dissatisfaction of students in learning may cause them to be unmotivated to study or look forward towards learning new things (Ismail et al., 2012). However, conveniences such as, flexible and favorable time, studying environment and accessible resources attracts students to

prefer online learning environment (Nguyen, 2017).

Moving on, inconsistencies in class timings and inconsideration of lecturers in workloads given and submission, have led students to frustration and distress, which affects them mentally, especially when they receive delayed feedbacks. Students' satisfaction and comprehension is also linked to instructor feedback, facilitation, lecturer's depth of understanding and delivering method of the knowledge (Rahman et al., 2015). This may influence students' attitude and perception in online learning environment as students may be lost without monitoring and guidance from their mentors, that potentially leads students to divert their attention to their surroundings instead of focusing on learning, which can be a great cause of academic neglect (Omar et al., 2012).

In addition, environment has massive potential in influencing one's learning experience. With the support of appropriate technology gadgets and networks, interaction in learning environment increases efficiency and improves academic achievements through carrying out online forums and discussions (Nguyen, 2017). However, students are heavily dependent on internet connection, technology and gadgets for online classes. Thus, whenever a technical problem takes place, students aren't able to submit assignments, access learning materials and communicate with classmates or lecturers. This may induce frustration in students, discourage learning processes and hinder their academic performances and achievements (Paul & Jefferson, 2019).

Furthermore, students' socialization, mental and physical health are compromised due to the demands of online learning. In long term, students may develop complications as the excessive use of technology can lead to mental overload, disconnect students from their surroundings, reduced consciousness of

time and concentration which may affect their academic performance as well (Halupa, 2016). As humanly interaction is also highly valued by students in their learning environment, the major lack of it in the current online learning circumstances also puts off students from actively learning and participating in their classes, leading to disinterest in studying, resulting in lower grades in classes (Dhawan, 2020).

In general, most participants in this study had negative experiences undergoing online learning. From this research, it is also evident that student experiences depends on the structure of the program, lecturer competence, peer interaction and relationship and student self-regulation. Despite the negative experiences, approximately 50% of the participants did report that the online learning experiences improved their academic achievement. Future research can further explore this phenomenon by looking into how students manage to rise academically during the COVID-19 pandemic and why some was unsuccessful.

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