

Online Learning Conditions and Psychological Distress among University Students During the Movement Control Order

Stephanie Victor, Ainnatasha Arif, Sarina Yusuf*, Loh Yoke Ling

Department of Communication & Media, Faculty of Language & Communication,
Sultan Idris Educational University, 35900 Tanjung Malim

Corresponding author*: sarinayusuf@fbk.upsi.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has hampered educational development as the nation prioritises measures to regulate and flatten the infection curve. Malaysia implemented the Movement Control Order (MCO) to practise social distancing, which resulted in the closure of all educational institutions nationwide and forced the learning process to continue online, with students across the country striving to make online learning the new norm. As a consequence of this situation, many students experienced psychological anguish while attempting to meet the challenges of the changing world. Thus, this study aims to investigate the online learning condition and psychological distress among Malaysian Public University (IPTA) students during the Movement Control Order. This cross-sectional study involved students from 15 public universities as a population and a sample of 139 randomly selected students. The modified and disseminated questionnaire showed a reliability of 0.901 for the online learning condition and 0.906 for psychological discomfort. The results showed that online learning circumstances had a substantial impact on psychological discomfort. The Ministry of Higher Education, in collaboration with university administrations, should strive to improve online learning conditions for all Malaysian students and develop strategies to address psychological discomfort caused by the pandemic's new normal. This is to ensure that students are better equipped to continue their education by maximising the use of the online platform to achieve a more effective learning experience.

Keywords: MCO, online learning, psychological distress, public university

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a strong impact on Malaysia (Asita Elengoe, 2020). Upon the detection of the first case in January, the Ministry of Health (MOH) devised standard guidelines for COVID-19 management. Eventually, the first confirmed case and a rise in the number of infected individuals, followed by two deaths, led to the announcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO). The fear of being afflicted by COVID-19 has consumed many people across the globe and has created a series of fears, confusion, and suspicions among all of humanity to the point that many people who had not even been diagnosed with the virus lost their lives (Zarghami, 2020). In the Malaysian context, a 62-year-old patient under investigation for COVID-19 committed suicide in Serdang Hospital, Selangor, due to depression, apparently. On 24 March, the Health Ministry's Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC) and Mercy Malaysia launched a support hotline for anyone affected by the current crisis. Since then, a third of all calls received have been psychologically related, and this number is expected to increase as the virus continues to spread. Since then, Malaysians experiencing mental illness saw a hike. With that, MOH published well-described guidelines on "Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in COVID-19". As of 22 September 2020, there were 10,276 COVID-19 cases, including 130 deaths, and 9395 cases of recovery were reported by the Ministry of Health (MOH) in Malaysia.

COVID-19 is a highly infectious virus that spreads rapidly among humans and has been considered responsible for tremendous health, social, and economic impacts across environments (Aylward & Liang, 2020). Therefore, among the restrictions were the closure of kindergartens, government and private schools, including daily schools, boarding schools, international schools, tahfiz centers, and other primary, secondary, and pre-university institutions. Public and higher education institutions, as well as skill training institutes nationwide, were also closed as part of the MCO. The implementation and extension of the MCO, along with the prohibition imposed by the Malaysian government on crossing state borders, left at least half of the student population stranded in most Malaysian universities and stripped them of their daily routines and habits, leading them to avoid social interactions. In addition, students who were unable to go home were left feeling insecure and anxious, forcing them to be mentally disturbed by the condition. The clinical psychologist at the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Psychiatry Department, Faculty of Medicine, reported that restrictions on movement and social contact for students might lead to intense boredom, emotional instability, and other psychological issues.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The introduction of online learning at all IPTA campuses has been met with mixed reactions, largely due to limited internet access in some areas and the economic and demographic disparities faced by students across Malaysia. This caused a lot of anxiety since online learning was still in its infancy and was very seldom fully adopted to become the new standard. Not to mention that learning conditions for kids depend not only on students' own efforts but also on the environment, technology, and financial stability in which they are placed. As a result, it is critical to assess the degree of online learning conditions among students at Malaysian public universities throughout the MCO period. Several organisations, including the Women's Aid Organisation and *Talian Kasih*, reported increases in contacts of 44 percent and 57 percent, respectively, after the government issued the Movement Control Order (MCO), one of the grounds for which is domestic violence. A student suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of a previous family trauma may find it necessary to remain with his or her family in order to maintain greater touch with them. This may result in catastrophe and a lack of concentration in school. As a result, it is critical to assess the degree of psychological discomfort experienced by students at Malaysian public universities throughout the MCO period. A study of this kind may spur further research into measures to prevent mental illness among students and strive toward the production of graduates who are both academically well-versed and psychologically stable as well.

Students, lecturers, and parents have all made significant contributions to meeting the educational needs of the present situation. As a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic, it may be concluded that Malaysia's educational system has undergone a pragmatic transformation. This research will aid in the development of a better and

improved environment, as well as recommendations for improving the online learning environment in order to improve the education quality of Malaysian university students and thus create better graduates. The fear of COVID-19 and MCO has been shown to have negative effects on students, causing hopelessness, fear, and stigma, as well as negatively impacting their educational endeavours (Bashar et al., 2020). To reduce students' stress levels, this research seeks to determine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between online learning conditions and psychological well-being. As a result of this study, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) will be better equipped to identify the needs of Malaysian public university students, improve the online learning environment, and reduce psychological distress, thereby producing a better generation for the country.

Fear, concern, and anxiety were among the feelings that were often exhibited throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in psychological discomfort and eventually stress and depression in the affected individual. The majority of Malaysian students were ultimately evacuated from their living campuses and retreated back to their hometowns as a result of an effort undertaken by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MOH) to combat the pandemic. According to the psychological officer of Universiti Malaysia Pahang Student Affairs and Alumni Department, among the most frequent problems students experience during the MCO are concerns about their academics, fear of contracting an infection, and homesickness. As soon as possible after the COVID-19-related halt in the education process was implemented, online learning was introduced, resulting in students from all over Malaysia enrolled in Malaysian public universities participating in it as a means of ensuring that the flow of education was not disrupted. A required step was taken because the global closure of educational institutions has disrupted educational processes, creating major delays in teaching and learning, as well as delayed assessments, leading to the cancellation of numerous public certification exams (M. AbuKarim, 2020). Specifically, according to Salleh et al. (2020), "online education is a technique that may assist both lecturers and students, particularly during Movement Control Order (MCO), when most schools and universities are forced to shut their doors as a result of Covid-19."

According to Maase et al. (2003), psychological distress has led people to develop validated culturally sensitive, multidimensional scales to be used in the assessment of psychological distress. According to Ridner (2003), (a) stress: a non-specific biological response to a demand or stressor that is not necessarily harmful to the individual. (b) Distress: a non-specific, biological or emotional response to a demand or stressor that is harmful to the individual. (c) Biological distress: potentially harmful physiological changes that occur in the human body in response to a stressor. (d) Psychological distress: the unique, disconcerting emotional state experienced by an individual in response to a specific stressor or demand that results in harm, either temporary or permanent, to the person. Online learning is no longer uncommon for every student during this pandemic. Many faculty members receive training to use online learning platforms, either as the sole delivery mode or as an add-on to face-to-face teaching (Lim M, 2020, as cited in Muacevic & Adler, 2020). Many universities lack sufficient infrastructure or resources to facilitate online teaching with immediate effect (Muacevic & Adler, 2020). The rapid worldwide increase in cases has created a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about what will happen. It has also caused tremendous stress among the university fraternity, including students. This stress may have unfavourable effects on students' learning and psychological health (Al-Rabiaahab et al., 2020). This can be supported by Xiao (2020), who stated that continuous dissemination, strict isolation measures, and online learning problems at all levels of education are expected to affect mental health, including students.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted quantitatively using a cross-sectional design, with an online survey as the primary data collection instrument, in which online learning conditions and psychological distress were treated as variables. Students from 15 Malaysian public universities make up the study's population. A group of 139 students from various fields of study was subjected to psychological distress as a result of online learning conditions while following the Malaysian movement control order. To ensure that every member of the population had a chance of being selected, 139 participants were selected via simple random sampling, in which respondents were given an online Google Form questionnaire distributed to university representatives. In terms of ethical considerations, prior to filling out the questionnaire, the students' permission to participate in this research was obtained. Participation was completely optional and anonymous. As soon as

the mobility

When the restriction order was enforced, a survey was sent to students at these 15 Malaysian universities via WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and email.

The first section of the research instrument consists of closed-ended demographic questions on the place of study, education level, age group, and the respondent's location. The second section of the instrument consists of the independent variable of this research, which is online learning condition. The operational definition of the online learning condition is students' learning environment and its conduciveness while on an online platform, comprising emotional, technical, and involvement aspects during online classes. This section comprises 21 questions on a Likert scale. The third section of the instrument comprises the dependent variable of this research: psychological distress. This section has been adapted from The Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale by William W. K. Zung (1965) to suit this research. The operational definition of psychological distress would be the form of emotion relating to stressors that are difficult to cope with without effective care faced by students. This section comprises 16 questions on a Likert scale.

Before conducting the study, a pre-test was administered, and Cronbach's alpha was 0.901 for the online learning condition and 0.906 for psychological distress, indicating good reliability. After data collection was completed, a total of 142 survey forms were successfully collected. However, the usable data is 139 after the data cleaning and screening process. SPSS version 26 was then used to analyze the data. The reliability of the actual test is also recorded. Descriptive analysis is then done to determine the level of the variables. Subsequently, exploratory data analysis (EDA) was conducted to identify a significant relationship between the online learning condition and psychological distress.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study have revealed a moderate level of online learning condition and a moderate level of psychological distress. This moderate level of online learning condition and psychological distress is related to the fact that the researchers were doing and collecting all of the data that were needed for this study during the Movement Control Order (MCO). The researchers were unable to get full access to collect their data.

Students' moderate learning condition shows that they are adjusting to the shift in the education system. Adapting to difficulties in the learning environment may affect the education process. In line with research by Alipio (2020), poor internet connectivity, financial issues, and a lack of devices pose challenges in online learning. This is because the quality of education for students should not be disturbed while taking into consideration efforts to develop and enhance the quality of online education to be conveyed in such predicaments (Affouneh et al., 2020) as well as to provide ease to the mode of it so students would be able to utilize it as much as possible (Cojocariu et al., 2014).

Table 1: Level of Online Learning Condition and Psychological Distress

Variables	Percent	Mean	SD
Online Learning Condition		2.17	.483
Low (1 ± 2.33)	4.3		
Moderate (2.34 ± 3.66)	71.2		
High (3.67 ± 5)	20.9		
Psychological Distress		2.17	.483
Low (1 ± 2.33)	4.3		
Moderate (2.34 ± 3.66)	71.2		

High (3.67 ± 5)

20.9

Three values of percentage of all 139 participants admit that they are struggling with stress, which automatically implies that they are indeed in a state of emotional suffering, also known as psychological distress. The first value is low, moderate, and high. Out of 139 participants, 4.3% experience a low level of psychological distress.

Unfortunately, 71.2% out of 139 participants experience a moderate level of psychological distress, and 20.9% of them experience a high level of psychological distress. The mean score for Psychological distress is 2.17, and the standard deviation is .483. The result of this predictor is consistent with a previous study (Burke et al., 2020).

Using a Pearson product-moment correlation, $r = .392$ was determined, indicating the direction and magnitude of the relationship between the online learning condition and psychological distress among IPTA students. The direction of this study's independent variable, online learning condition, and dependent variable, psychological distress, is positive. However, according to Guilford's Rule of Thumb, the relationship between the online learning condition and psychological distress is low. The inferential statistics of the correlation, $\text{sig-}r = 0.000$, resulting in H_0 being rejected and H_A being accepted, indicating there is a significant relationship between online learning condition and psychological distress in IPTA students during the Movement Control Order (MCO), and the test scores are at the .05 level of significance. (α value $< .05$).

Table 2: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation

Variables	<i>r</i>	<i>sig-r</i>
Online Learning Condition	.392	.000
Psychological Distress		

The apparent differences between face-to-face and distance learning, along with the accompanying environmental variables that affect distance learners, make anxiety more likely to affect distance learning (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019). Gibbs, Habeshaw, and Habeshaw (1989) put it succinctly, 'Anxiety causes students to consistently underperform. Anxiety in distance learners stems mainly from their life experiences, and expectations/ assumptions they make as a result. Distance learners tend to fear failure yet, conversely, can have high, even unrealistic, expectations of themselves.

5. CONCLUSION

Education is undoubtedly a difficult experience for students. At this pace, it will be fascinating to discover more about the effects of stress on students' academic performance. Due to the prevalence of this pandemic, it has become necessary to redefine the readiness of Malaysian students for online learning in order to prevent their mental health from being adversely affected in the future. A moderate degree of online learning condition was discovered, as was a moderate level of psychological distress as a result of this research. There is a statistically significant connection between online learning conditions and psychological distress; however, the strength of that relationship is moderate in comparison to other relationships. Given these results, it is imperative that online education be improved, and equally essential to develop methods and strategies for addressing psychological distress when participating in an online educational programme. It is critical to ensure the security of services such as the use of technological devices in order to offer psychological assistance (Xiang et al., 2020).

As much as the implementation of online education is relevant today, mental health education and awareness of this issue also need to be addressed. This would help students to abolish their negative view of psychological distress and instead seek help on the pertaining matter due to educational stress during the MCO during the pandemic. Although psychological distress may result from online learning, it is important to come together to find better ways to address this situation and make use of the available online platforms. This study would be useful for future studies to investigate

more aspects of online learning conditions and psychological distress with a different group of study subjects. This research should also be conducted among lecturers and university management to obtain results from various perspectives. This would also allow researchers to understand the viewpoints of these subjects.

Future research could also explore respondents' socioeconomic status in the demographic section. This is because the economic factor affects a student's online learning conditions, which in turn affect psychological distress. In addition, future research should examine methods to improve the conditions of online learning to provide better platforms for online education, which would make it much more successful for students in the long run. Universities should rethink the channels and methods they use to deliver instruction and assess students to enhance the online learning environment. Likewise, future studies should be focused on helping students reduce psychological distress so that they can examine their mental well-being and take steps to improve it. In addition, it is critical for future studies to focus their research on psychological distress and online learning conditions at the faculty level in order to identify and address the gaps that have been identified in their specific educational demands, as well as to act as a helping effort during times of distress due to the pandemic.

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