

# INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES OF COVID-19: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The Coronavirus pandemic 2019 (COVID-19) is hastily spreading, bringing pressure and challenges to international students in higher education institutions who were locked down on campus during the COVID-19 outbreak. We sought to explore psychological experiences of international higher education students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Eswatini. A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted. Participants were 15 conveniently selected international higher education students who were locked down on Campus from March 20 to September 25, 2020. The interviews were conducted face to face. Data were thematically analysed. The study was informed by the ecological systems theory. The psychological experiences of international higher education students during COVID-19 pandemic were categorized in to four themes. First negative emotions present in early stages involving discomfort, anxiety and helplessness caused by isolation, fear and concern for safety. Second self-coping strategies included psychological and life adjustments, social distancing, acceptance of wearing of masks, hand sanitizing and online learning. Third we reported growth under the crisis which included affection for family members, peers and self-reflection. Finally, we reported that positive emotions occurred concurrently with negative emotions. During the COVID-19 crisis positive and negative emotions of international higher education students intertwined and co-occurred. Self-coping strategies and psychological growth played a crucial role in maintaining mental health of the students. The international students in higher education were resilient in coping with the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown situation which enhanced their participation in online learning.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*International higher education students, psychological experiences, COVID-19, Eswatini.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Coronavirus pandemic 2019 (COVID -19) is hastily spreading, bringing pressure and challenges to international students in higher education institutions who were locked down on campus during the COVID-19 outbreak. According to the United Nation's Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), COVID-19 outbreak interrupted the learning of more than one billion students in 191 countries around the world (UNESCO, 2020). The pandemic has affected different people in different ways such that activities of teaching and learning widened the gap between students and educators who can afford (rich) and those who cannot afford (poor). Those who afforded continued to expand their knowledge while those marginalised were diminished. The situation worsened as COVID-19 outbreak led to the suspension of on-going educational programmes. Universities had to drastically shift from face to face to introduce online teaching and learning, thus inducing anxiety among students, particularly

international higher education students. Also, the cancellation of physical events and activities, and the formation of a “new normality” in higher education occurred globally (Tesar, 2020) including one higher education institution in Eswatini. International students were affected due to travel restrictions and institutional closures that followed in a very limited space of time to enforce prevention measures (social distancing, wearing of masks, washing and sanitizing of hands). In this way, international students had to be locked down in Eswatini, which affected their psychological wellbeing and their learning effectiveness.

Different countries including Eswatini immediately opted for online learning (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020; Toquero, 2020) to continue with the education mandate of the institutions of higher learning. This is where some lecturers recorded and uploaded their lessons online for the students to access and to respond to learning activities. However, it is noted that a successful implementation of online teaching and learning requires stable technological infrastructure: hardware and software, steady internet connectivity, well-organized, knowledgeable and qualified lecturers and students who can engage meaningfully in online teaching and learning activities. Eswatini is a middle income country where most communities do not have stable electricity supply, let alone the access to internet connectivity to enable lecturers and students to fully engage in online teaching and learning. Additionally, the cost of data is too high that it cannot be afforded by some lecturers, as well as the students. These posed critical challenges of limited resources such that the majority of students including international students were directly affected, which impacted on their educational outcomes in Eswatini.

This study reports the psychological experiences of international students who were locked down in one higher education institution in Eswatini during COVID-19 pandemic first phase between March and September, 2020. The objectives of the study were to explore the experiences of COVID-19 on international undergraduate university students in Eswatini, particularly their psychological wellbeing, learning and coping strategies. The research questions were:

1. What were the international students’ main psychological feelings during the COVID-19 outbreak?
2. What were the changes in international students’ lives since the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What were international students’ coping strategies for COVID-19 crisis?

In this paper, we give an account of the theoretical underpinning of the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) by Bronfenbrenner (1979) at an institution of higher learning in Eswatini, among international undergraduate students’ psychological experiences during COVID-19 crisis. We describe the COVID-19 crisis and how it has affected teaching and learning. We then present different aspects of psychological experiences of students in institutions of higher learning during the COVID-19 crisis in developed countries and its impact on educational outcomes in the literature review.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Corona virus outbreak has amplified the inequalities and struggles that some students face on a daily basis. The pandemic has put basic gross inequalities (Le Grange, 2020) among societies in the global south, Eswatini included. Casale and Flett (2020) anticipated that a persisting pandemic would have a considerable impact in the importance of an individual’s psychological needs; due to implementation of preventive measures of social distancing, quarantine, self-isolation, to stop individuals from being exposed to COVID-19 contaminations. However, remaining indoors in isolation for an extended period was shown to affect risk factors for anxiety and stress disorders (Ansari & Yousefabad, 2020). The lockdown decision that happened due to COVID-19 has forced institutions of higher learning to abruptly use online learning to minimize

the disruption in education delivery. However, many students from marginalized and poverty stricken communities do not have access to the digital devices or the necessary skills that are required for online learning (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). This is typical in both developed and developing countries such as Eswatini (Demuyakor, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In addition, in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is critical.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 seeks to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015 p.14). Furthermore, the government of Eswatini through its Ministry of Education & Training (MoET) has aligned its education strategic plan with SDG 4 and has included plans of infusing ICT in education. In its ICT Policy Goal, The MoET in Eswatini states that:

Teaching and learning content shall be progressively digitised and ICT as a subject area shall be introduced into all schools in Eswatini as qualified teaching personnel and resources become available. ICT will also be used as a tool for teaching and learning of knowledge and skills throughout the education and training sector for blended learning ... (MoET, 2018 p.26).

The above goal means that not all the educators and students are equipped with ICT skills due to shortage of personnel in the ICT field of study. This is despite the role that ICT plays in “the development of 21st Century skills.” and it being a key aspect in “Eswatini’s fulfilment of its national development goals.” (MoET, 2018, p. 26). Paradoxically, inequality between the poor and the rich, rural and urban residents, males and females in institutions of higher education has also been widening, thus corresponding with the current global trends in social inequality (Ayelazuno & Aziabah 2021). The Education Sector Policy of MoET in Eswatini indicates that ICT is a vital teaching and learning tool throughout the education and training sectors. However, many students and educators do not possess the necessary ICT skills and knowledge to embark on online teaching and learning. Moreover, the situation brought by the COVID-19 pandemic has caused tremendous stress on the higher education system, for lecturers and tutors, but most especially for students’ particularly international students whose psychological wellbeing was and is still affected due to lockdown.

According to Browning et al. (2021) university students are increasingly known as a psychologically weak populace, which suffer from higher levels of misery, anxiety, substance abuse and disorderly eating compared to the general population. Browning et.al conducted a survey on 2,534 students from seven United States (US) universities and colleges between mid-March and early-May 2020, to gauge psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic on university and college students. The authors found that more than half of all university students have experienced high levels of psychological impact from the COVID-19 pandemic (Browning et al., 2021) with college students having been among the most strongly affected by COVID-19 because of uncertainty regarding academic success, future careers and social life during college, among other concerns. The authors further indicated that females, younger students, students with pre-existing health conditions, and students who knew someone infected with COVID-19 were in the high risk group. Moreover, the authors reported that lower-income and Asian students also appeared to be at higher risk. It was reported that many students felt increased stress levels, anxiety and depressive symptoms as a result of the changed delivery and uncertainty of university education. Additionally, technological concerns of online learning, being far from home, social isolation, decreased family income, and future employment were reported to have affected the same students (Browning et al., 2021).

A study by Dodd et al. (2021) in Australian universities outlined that the pandemic raised significant challenges that disrupted teaching and learning. The authors reported that due to travel restrictions that were in place, many international and interstate students were unable to begin semester one as planned, with courses and programmes rapidly transitioning from face-to-face to online delivery to ensure the continuity of teaching and assessment. Dodd et al. (2021) noted that online learning with its challenges, affected many students who experienced lost learning opportunities particularly if their chosen field of study was not amenable to exclusive online teaching (medicine, health sciences) thus, causing them to have psychological distress and severe depressive symptoms.

In another instance, Händel et al. (2020) investigated the digital readiness and its effects on higher education students' socio-emotional perceptions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in Germany. They recommended the need for support of higher education students in successfully coping with the challenges of emergency remote studying. This is because according to Händel et al. (2020) the limited social exchange that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic raised negative emotions among students, while social isolation triggered stress-related emotions and reduced their psychological wellbeing.

Mok, Xiong, Ke, and Cheung (2021) conducted a quantitative study that examined the Mainland China and Hong Kong students' studying abroad expectations after the pandemic. The authors found that of the 2,739 respondents, 84 percent showed no interest in studying abroad after the pandemic. They also reported negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, fear and guilt to have increased among students during the pandemic. The psychological experiences of international undergraduate higher education students of COVID-19 were understood by applying the EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The EST explains how different systems have been disrupted during the COVID-19 outbreak in our study. In this study the individual (international student) was placed at the centre of the different sub-systems.

## **2.1. Theoretical Framework**

The theory was proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 that considers environmental conditions apart from intrapersonal and genetic factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The EST includes four interrelated levels (micro, meso, exo and macro systems) that must be considered to show how COVID-19 crisis intertwined with students' support systems. The individual is at the center and all other systems are nested around. In our study, the individual (international student) was placed at the centre of all sub-systems. Bronfenbrenner suggests that an ecological perspective encourages individuals to consider the holistic environment for themselves.

Microsystem, describes interactions in individual's immediate environment such as family, school, neighbours, friends or peers (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The EST recognizes the significance of the immediate environment (microsystem) through the broader layers [exo, macro and chrono systems] (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The Microsystem incorporates the immediate environmental surroundings of the individual and those with whom the individual (international student) interacts such as friends, parents, educators and wardens. COVID-19 pandemic raised challenges for higher education institutions that had to drastically migrate from face-to-face to online delivery to ensure the continuity of teaching (Dodd et al., 2021). It should be noted that COVID-19 experience is different for families with low, middle, and high socio-economic status. The use of online learning became a serious challenge as students of lower socio economic status may not have the same accessibility to digital devices due to limited resources (Fegert et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2021). This means that students coming from families who can afford (rich) continued to expand their knowledge by engaging fully in online learning, while those who cannot afford digital devices (poor) are likely to diminish, thus affecting their psychological wellbeing. This

situation could be applicable to international students as some may come from poor and rich socio economic backgrounds (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020). However, some studies have shown that online learning offers many benefits for students because it involves student-centeredness, it is more flexible (Dhawan, 2020), and it can also improve interaction with students by providing asynchronous and synchronous tools such as e-mail, forums, chats and others.

COVID-19 facilitated an increase in disparities based on family's ability to provide sufficient resources for students in the higher institution of learning including international students. Additionally, international students who were locked down due to COVID-19 may have experienced additional stress due to limited support as they could not meet their families during the lockdown period (Elmer, Mephram, Stadtfeld, 2020; Sun et al., 2020). Another disadvantage could result from social distancing whereby international students could not borrow or share digital learning devices.

Mesosystem involves connections between setting such as in the relationship between home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The COVID-19 pandemic has forced leaders at universities to take drastic measures that affect how educators and students interact and socialize with each other (Elmer et al., 2020). An institution of higher learning is the second place for students and the replacement of families and parents (Eliasa, 2012) that have a duty in helping students achieve their education and developmental tasks. COVID-19 crisis made it difficult for international students to interact with their close support systems such as family, educators and friends. This is because individuals are required to reduce physical contact to others outside one's household and social distancing (Elmer et al., 2020). While social distancing measures may positively slow down the spread of the virus, the increase of social isolation of international students affected their psychological wellbeing (Van Bavel et al., 2020). This also included lecturers who were not able to interact with these students since the university staff was working from home. Reduced social interactions, lack of social support, and newly arising stressors associated with the COVID-19 crisis could potentially affect students' mental health negatively (Elmer et al., 2020). In the absence of the support from parents, issues of food insecurity, income for purchasing of data among others disproportionately affected international students who were locked down, thus affecting their psychological wellbeing (Elmer et al., 2020; Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020).

Likewise, Exosystem describes settings in which the individual is not directly involved, but which nonetheless affect them (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This may include experiences in social setting in which an individual does not have an active role but which nevertheless influence experience in an immediate context (Eliasa, 2012). For instance parents' stress on job loss, affects their family life, and financial insecurity. During COVID-19 outbreak, non-essential businesses such as universities and industries were closed, which affected economies and some parents lost their jobs. The intensity of parental stress and family burden has the potential to heavily impact children (Lawson et al., 2020) as children are not immune to their parent/guardian's feelings. Similarly, international students whose parents may have lost jobs as a consequence for COVID-19 crisis. The Macrosystem refers to the larger social and cultural environments in which all the other systems exist (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). It consists of the wider environment and draws mostly on attitudes, ideologies, culture and beliefs that have indirect effects on the other systems and the individual. This system includes the international students' psychological experiences of COVID19, where their closest individuals provide support, skills and guidance (Ministry of Health, educators, and friends) to sustain them. In view of the challenges and constraints encountered by students and their effects over the life course transitions depicts chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserts that, in many cases, families respond to different stressors within the societal constraints existent in their lives. For instance, during COVID-19 crisis, many families were happy to be alive and to have a job and food, which was the case for international students. The EST has been adapted mainly to help in comprehending the COVID-19 effects on psychological experiences of international students. Thus, challenges, coping strategies, support or a combination of both positive and negative experiences exist. The experiences of being an international higher education student are formed at many levels. The EST provides a framework to explore these levels and the interactions between and among them. This, theory is relevant in this study because it includes multi-dimensional social context and provides a multi-layered approach for data analysis.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Research Design

We adopted the Colaizzi's phenomenological method (1978) to qualitatively analyze the psychological experience of international undergraduate higher education students of the COVID19 pandemic during an institutional lockdown in Eswatini. The Colaizzi's phenomenological method emphasizes on the experiences and feelings of participants and stresses on shared patterns and not individual features in the research. This approach allowed for genuineness of the collected experience of the participants to observe scientific standards. Phenomenology is not only about description of the phenomenon but also an interpretive process. In essence, we connect the different meanings of lived experiences and perspectives shared by international higher education students (Van Manen, 2016).

#### 3.2. Participants and Setting

The participants were fifteen (n=15) international higher education students from one institution in the Manzini region of Eswatini (females = 8). The participants were conveniently selected based on having been locked down in an institution due to COVID19 pandemic from March 20 to September 25, 2020. The inclusion criteria included (1) being an international undergraduate higher education student who could not travel back home due to COVID-19 pandemic; (2) volunteering to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria were being a local student and failure to participate in at least two interviews during the study period. We determined the number of the required participants by interviewing students who met the inclusion criteria until data were saturated and no new information were produced. See Table 1 for more details on participants' demographic information.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants (n = 15)

| Characteristic        | Frequency | %  |
|-----------------------|-----------|----|
| <i>Gender</i>         |           |    |
| Male                  | 07        | 47 |
| Female                | 08        | 53 |
| <i>Age range</i>      |           |    |
| 20- 25                | 09        | 60 |
| 26-30                 | 06        | 40 |
| <i>Level of Study</i> |           |    |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> year  | 05        | 33 |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> year  | 10        | 67 |
| <i>Nationality</i>    |           |    |

|                             |    |    |
|-----------------------------|----|----|
| Motswana                    | 03 | 20 |
| Mosotho                     | 02 | 13 |
| Zimbabwean                  | 10 | 67 |
| <i>Religion</i>             |    |    |
| Christian                   | 12 | 80 |
| Islamic                     | 02 | 13 |
| Traditional African Beliefs | 01 | 07 |
| <i>Number of interviews</i> |    |    |
| 2 -3                        | 09 | 60 |
| 4-5                         | 06 | 40 |

### 3.3. Interview Outline

For developing the interview outline we started off by reviewing relevant literature, seeking experts' opinions. Then we selected two (2) students for piloting the interview outline. The main probe questions for the participants included: (1) what were the main psychological feelings of COVID19 pandemic? (2) What were the coping strategies? (3) What were the insights amidst the pandemic? (4) What has changed in your life since the COVID-19 pandemic? (5) How do you cope with changes in your school and life? (6) What are your thoughts and feelings about the pandemic?

### 3.4. Procedure

Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training. We contacted all 15 international student participants of the study individually and provided them with a participant booklet. The booklet included: invitation letter, information sheet, informed consent form, and the purpose and significance of the study. The participants individually consented to partake in the study by signing informed consent forms which included authorization that allowed the use of transcripts for publication. We informed them that all names and identifiable data would be changed within the transcript to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. In addition, participants were also informed that all data collected were confidential. Furthermore, we informed the participants that their participation in the study was appreciated, but that it was purely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any explanation and penalty. Following the confirmation of their interest to participate in the study, we then individually met with all fifteen participants as they were recruited and explained their roles in the study in more detail in observance with the COVID-19 preventive measures. We then scheduled the interview time at their convenience and adhered to the COVID-19 preventive measures suggested by the World Health Organization and Eswatini Ministry of Health.

### 3.5. Data Collection

All participants (n=15) took part in individual face to face interviews in an unoccupied room for privacy and without interruptions. Both the first and second authors conducted the face to face interviews and have experience in qualitative interview in education of over six (6) years respectively. They also possess doctoral qualification in Education and Counselling, hence were able to offer psychological support for participants who exhibited emotional distress during the interviews to prevent psychological harm. The interview took approximately 25 minutes per person. The participants were interviewed in English. Interviews were audiotape recorded for easy recall of responses. Audio recordings were transcribed using forward translation procedure (Africa Scholarship Development Enterprise [ASDE], 2009). We remained neutral during data collection and established good rapport with the participants. We employed techniques such as

unconditional acceptance, active listening and clarification to encourage trustworthiness of data. We also arranged for each participant to take part in at least 1-2 face to face interviews and 1-2 telephone interviews to allow for data collection at multiple time points.

### **3.6. Ensuring Study Trustworthiness**

We implemented two data trustworthiness processes: credibility and dependability. Our data credibility checks included interviewing the participants in their institutional setting with member checks, cross-checking the interview records for accuracy during multiple time points.

### **3.7. Data Analysis**

After every interview, the recording was transcribed and analysed using a procedure suggested by (Colaizzi, 1978). This included having two researchers who independently reviewed the interview materials, summarized and deduced meaningful statements, and then developed themes. Contradictory opinions on the contents of the themes were discussed and resolved by consensus by a group of researchers comprising of two (2) masters of education and two (2) doctors of education.

## **4. FINDINGS**

Colaizzi's phenomenological analysis of the data yielded four (4) major themes in exploring the psychological experiences of international undergraduate higher education students of COVID-19 in an institution in Eswatini. The four (4) themes included: (1) negative emotions present in early stages; (2) self-coping strategies; (3) growth under the crisis; and (4) positive emotions occurred concurrently with negative emotions. The four themes are summarized below. We present example statements in Table 2.

### **4.1. Theme 1: Negative Emotions Present in Early Stages**

All participants reported to experience negative emotions during the first few weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown. As the number of COVID-19 cases continued to rise, the anxiety of all the international higher education students (n=15) increased causing discomfort from not knowing how the disease was spread and if they were next to contract the disease.

All participants reported to experience fear, which increased as they heard from friends, family and read of COVID-19 death cases increasing in the country. It is evident that the microsystem has some influence on international higher education students when it came to acquiring information about COVID-19 updates in the country as well as their countries of origin. The participants expressed a sense of helplessness and concern for their safety as they were away from their homes. Most students (n = 9) expressed concern about being isolated in their halls of residence. They were mainly concerned about the unknown emerging infectious disease and their susceptibility to contracting the disease. They also reported being uncertain about the mode of transmission for the virus, which psychologically affected them.

Most (n= 9) students in this study were between 20 and 25 years old. All students expressed concern about the impact of the pandemic on the health of their families. They also reported that their families were worried about their health. Most of the participants (n=9) reported to feel anxious and guilty due to not being home and were mainly worried of their families.

#### **4.2. Theme 2: Self Coping Strategies**

All participants indicated that they used humor and isolation as psychological defense mechanisms. Participants reported to rely on their friends and family as a source of support to defuse their worry about contracting COVID-19. All participants reported to joke about the new normal of wearing masks which made some of them appear funny. Most students (n =12) reported to use isolation as time for prayer to ask for protection against contracting COVID-19. All participants indicated that they took the initiative to contribute money to buy groceries including fruits and vegetables that they sold as a way of generating income. They reported that they took turns in cooking meals to avoid buying meals from the cafeteria which they reported to be tasteless, and this made them eat meals they preferred and enjoyed.

All participants (n=15) expressed their need to adjust their lifestyles by accepting to wear masks when in public places and social distancing to avoid contracting COVID-19. Some students (n=7) indicated that they tried to wash and sanitize their hands regularly even though this was hard to do as they were not used to this practice. They indicated having challenges in always using hand sanitizers as this was a habit they were not used to. Most students (n = 8) reported to be frustrated with online learning which presented itself with challenges such as poor internet connectivity and lack of technology skills. Additionally, participants reported not understanding content uploaded on online platforms by course instructors as well as not having the digital devices to use for their online learning. Participants had to navigate support systems (microsystem) to survive within their institution of higher learning. For example, they had to balance the interaction between them, and institutional policies such as online learning and adhering to COVID-19 preventive measure, thereby observing the mesosystem.

#### **4.3. Theme 3: Growth Under Crisis**

All the participants (n=15) reported their appreciation for the support from friends, relatives, families, churches, wardens and the institution. They also understood the importance of health and family. Most students (n=10) reported that they would work hard even though online learning was challenging and live with state of appreciation and gratitude in the future. This is because they revealed that they would now be knowledgeable about online learning, which is a new culture as indicated in the macrosystem. The majority of students (n=12) reported that online learning made them to temporarily forget about the pandemic since they continued to learn. Most of the students (n=8) reported to value the institution decision to continue with the learning and teaching despite COVID-19 situation and were very happy.

#### **4.4. Theme 4: Positive Emotions Occurred Concurrently with Negative Emotions**

Even though most of the participants experienced negative emotions such as fear, anxiety and discomfort, they also had positive emotions progressively. Most students (n=10) reported to experience positive emotions after a few weeks. Although fear and anxiety were brought on by the pandemic, participants reported to have assessed the pandemic prevention and control progress and had confidence in medical ability of the institutional support. Simultaneously, they felt confidence in self-prevention and control ability after taking COVID-19 orientation training by the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the institution. Additionally, participants' psychological experiences of COVID-19 enabled them to get support, skills and guidance to sustain them in view of the COVID-19 challenges. They also reported to encounter constraints and their effects over face to face transition to online learning. This evidently depicts the chronosystem, where students adapted to a life stressor (COVID-19) and still continued with their education (online learning).

In the face of difficult living conditions and challenges in the fight against the pandemic, the majority (n=9) of the participants reported feeling happy. The students felt happy and gratitude for being alive and continuing with their learning during the pandemic. Furthermore, friends and family support brought happiness. Contact with family through social media platforms such as what's App, Facebook, Twitter, Snap chats were key in this study. Additionally, the institution had a COVID19 task group in place to support and motivate all students. The encouragement of friends also brought happiness to the students.

Table 2. Themes identified through interviews with international higher education students

| Theme  | subtheme   | Examples of Verbatim Quotations   |
|--|--|---|
| Negative emotion present in early stages                       | Discomfort<br>Anxiety<br>Fear<br>Helplessness<br>Guilty                        | <i>It is not easy to stay for over six months without going home, we are not comfortable at all</i><br><i>We do not know what will happen in the next step</i><br><i>I felt helpless knowing that there is nothing I could do to protect my family back home from COVID-19</i><br><i>I was very scared to live with my peers in the residence hall.</i>   |
| Self-coping strategies   | Humour<br>Isolation<br>Team work initiatives<br>Lifestyle adjustment<br>Prayer | <i>I jog with my friends that we are now locked down together and do not know when we will go home</i><br><i>We contribute money to buy fruits and vegetables that we re-sell to generate more money</i><br><i>I pray every day for myself, my family so that we don't contract COVID-19</i><br><i>I pray for myself and friends here, not to contract this virus and to have money for buying data bundles.</i><br><i>We are now like a family, we cook food together and eat together</i><br><i>I have to always remind my friends to wear masks and to wash and sanitize their hands regularly- they now call me warden.</i> |
| Growth under crisis  | Team Support<br>Appreciation<br>Gratitude<br>Hard work during online learning  | <i>I am happy to receive donations from our church members, some lecturers and friends</i><br><i>I appreciate what the university has done for us, to keep us together as international students</i><br><i>I am grateful to the decision of the university to embrace online learning, even though it has its challenges</i><br><i>I just want to finish and work hard on my online tasks as this is my last semester, which we don't know when it will end</i><br><i>I thank God that I am alive during this crisis</i>  |
| Positive emotions occurred concurrently with negative emotions | Calmness<br>Happiness<br>Confidence in Self-prevention                         | <i>The COVID-19 training brought calmness and peace of mind in my life, regarding my safety</i><br><i>I am happy to be alive and I am able to continue with online learning, despite the challenges</i><br><i>I can still survive as long as I observe the COVID-19 ways of prevention</i><br><i>I wear a mask every time I go out in public.</i>   |

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study reports the psychological experiences of international undergraduate students in a higher education institute in Eswatini when there was lockdown that caused significant disruptions due to COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the study are summarized into four major themes: Negative emotions present in early stages, Self coping strategies, Growth under crisis and Positive emotions occurred concurrently with negative emotions.

Participants experienced discomfort caused by uncertainty of COVID-19 and the drastic shift to online learning brought anxiety and fear. In this study participants concern was about the seriousness of COVID-19, which forced them to be isolated from their lecturers and peers. The rapid shift to online learning has had a substantial negative influence on both the overall learning experience of international higher education students, and their psychological wellbeing. The finding of this study mirrors what previous studies have reported among university students in developed countries about psychological wellbeing and academic experience of University Students during COVID-19 (Browning et al., 2021; Dodd et al., 2021; Händel et al., 2020). Moreover, the finding indicated that the participants were anxious and fearful about their families' health due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 virus. The COVID-19 pandemic has evolved into a serious threat to education, economic, social and health sectors given its prolonged impact, geographical spread and lack of cure or effective treatment (Sun et al., 2021). The finding that participants were fearful and anxious about their family members' health seems to be unique to our study. Consequently participants' fear about health and their families disrupted their concentration for online learning. They also experienced a sense of helplessness due to fear of contracting the virus and being isolated in Eswatini. The acquiring of information by participants about COVID-19 updates which relied on their peers and families is consistent with the microsystem domain of EST (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

There is research evidence to suggest that coping strategies and social support are mediators of stress (Sun et al., 2020). The finding revealed that the participants adopted humour and isolation as their coping strategies to psychologically adjust to the COVID-19 situation. The pressure of COVID-19 pandemic caused the students to actively make psychological adjustments. The participants did this by adjusting their lifestyle to observing preventive behaviours against COVID-19 of social distancing, wearing masks and washing and sanitizing of hands. The participants also adopted prayer as their coping strategy during the outbreak. Seemingly, their adoption of prayer could be consistent with their religious beliefs, which is in support with what previous studies among university students' experiences with COVID-19 pandemic have reported (Sun et al., 2021). In addition, the findings showed that the participants engaged in team work initiatives that reflected greater solidarity for survival. This is where the students contributed money to buy fruits and vegetables to re-sell in order to accord them finances to eat healthy food and buy data bundles to sustain online learning. This finding supports what other studies have reported that as the economic consequences of COVID-19 have continued to unfold, it has become apparent that individuals from lower socioeconomic background have been excessively burdened across the globe (Ahmed et al., 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Sun et al., 2021) which was the case in this study. The pandemic has negatively affected the students' interactions with their peers and families including lecturers, which is inconsistent with the microsystem level of the EST (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Literature indicates that crisis outbreaks can cause psychological distress to those affected. In this study the finding suggest that the participants grew under the COVID-19 crisis. The participants shared in self-reflection of their own education (shift to online) and gratitude for being alive (Sun et al., 2020). The finding in our study revealed that engaging in online learning temporarily preoccupied the students to forget about the crisis. The participants demonstrated positive forces

such as expressing more appreciation for health, family and gratitude for social support, which previous studies have confirmed (Sun et al., 2021). Furthermore, the students took the initiative to seek team support to adapt to internal (shift to online learning, observe COVID-19 preventative measures) and external (scare of contracting COVID-19 virus) environment changes, which enhanced their psychological wellbeing. The shift to online learning and initiative to seek team support by the students highlight the relevance of the macrosystem domain of EST by (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The finding of the existence of positive emotions in the participants such as calmness, relaxation, and happiness, occurred concurrently with negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety and discomfort during the first weeks of the pandemic. Other studies have reported the presence of negative emotions during COVID-19 crisis (Browning et al., 2021; Dodd et al., 2021; Elmer et al., 2020; Händel et al., 2020). The participants seemingly believed that positive emotions were generally related to support from peers, families, institution and Ministry of Health. Apparently, social support was critical in overcoming stressful situations (Lawson et al., 2020). The calmness, relaxation and happiness of the participants after taking part in the COVID-19 training are hardly mentioned in other studies (Dodd et al., 2021). Literature suggests that positive emotions play a significant role in recovery and adjustment of psychological distress (Sun et al., 2020; Elmer et al., 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2020). Our finding in this study revealed that psychological the participants during COVID-19 crisis strengthening social support, promoting coping strategies and encouraging positive emotions are important in promoting psychological wellbeing and adjusting to the drastic shift of online learning. This affirms the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) where the participants adapted to a life stressors (COVID-19, rapid shift to online learning) and still continued with their educational activities.

## **6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The study had the following limitations. Firstly, the small sample size restrains the reproducibility of findings due to the characteristics of qualitative research. Secondly, due to the nature of COVID-19 outbreak we could not conduct focus group discussions with the participants to avoid potential transmission of the virus. Thirdly, we relied heavily on review of literature on psychological experiences of students in developed countries as we could access limited literature from developing countries. Future studies could consider using larger samples to allow for deeper understanding of international students' psychological experiences of COVID-19. Psychological experiences of COVID-19 of students with disabilities and locals could further be explored. However, our study can serve as a basis for higher education professionals who want to conduct a similar study.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The study provided a detailed understanding of psychological experiences of international students with COVID-19 applying a phenomenological design. We found that during the pandemic, negative and positive emotions of the participants against the pandemic intertwined and co-occurred. Self-coping strategies and psychological growth played a crucial role in maintaining psychological wellbeing of the international students. Our study provided preliminary data for further psychological intervention to enhance online teaching and learning in higher educational institutions. The participants in a higher education institution in Eswatini appeared to be resilient in coping with the COVID-19 crisis and abrupt shift to online learning.

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