

THE PSYCHOLOGIC IMPACT OF ONLINE AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) DURING THE PANDEMIC COVID-19 AMONG LECTURERS IN UITM PUNCAK ALAM, SELANGOR: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Ruslan AA¹, Mahadi SN¹, Sh Abdullah SS¹, and Tobi HE².

¹Centre of Nursing Studies, Faculty of Health Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Selangor Kampus Puncak Alam, 42300 Bandar Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

²Nursing Department, Instituto de Ciência da Saúde, Rua de Kampu Baru, Comoro, Dom Aleixo, Dili, Timor-Leste

Correspondence:

Sharifah Shafinaz Sh Abdullah
Centre of Nursing Studies, Faculty of Health Sciences,
Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Selangor
Kampus Puncak Alam,
42300 Bandar Puncak Alam,
Selangor, Malaysia
Email: shasya@uitm.edu.my

Abstract

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has rapidly spread across the globe, causing huge disruptions to everyday lifestyles, including in Malaysia. The government-enforced movement control order (MCO) forced the closure of all public and private educational institutions, affecting all the physical learning sessions as they must be shifted to online and distance learning (ODL). This has created stress among lecturers due to these unanticipated changes. A total of 12 participants were involved in this qualitative phenomenology design to explore their experiences of the ODL and how they cope with their stress. Face-to-face interviews were carried out with the guidance of a semi-structured interview format. Thematic analysis of the in-depth interview transcriptions found there were 6 themes, and 15 subthemes representing feelings, challenges, and ways of dealing with ODL. The study concluded that ODL during the COVID-19 pandemic can affect mental health and well-being among participants.

Keywords: COVID-19, ODL, Stress, Anxiety, Depression, Lecturers

Introduction

COVID-19 has been spreading rapidly across more than 200 countries around the globe, overreaching health services and intensifying shelter confinement. Concern about the current issues, Movement Control Order (MCO) had been announced by the Malaysian Government for the whole country on the 18th March 2020 to prevent and controlling of the pandemic. The government-enforced MCO forced the closure of all public and private educational institutions, affecting all the physical learning sessions as they must be shifted to ODL. Due to this pandemic, Clemente et al. state that worse psychological conditions may be affected by personal restrictions, mass confinement, and compulsory home isolation (1). In addition, many lecturers did not have sufficient technical skills and confidence to conduct online teaching as it had to be conducted in a short period of changes from physical learning to online-based learning. This created stress among lecturers due to these unanticipated changes. Kamarul et al. in their study in 2020 stated that during movement restriction, people tried several strategies to cope with psychological distress,

but they showed non-adaptive unhealthy behaviors due to long-term consequences of stress (2). Proper management and better working conditions in the organization were the best forms of stress prevention (3). Their mental health and quality of life declined after the pandemic outbreak (2).

Therefore, this study aimed to explore the experiences of the ODL and how to cope with stress among lecturers in UiTM Puncak Alam. This had created some stress, anxiety, and depression among many lecturers due to these unanticipated changes (2-5). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the lecturers' feelings and experiences in attending the ODL session during the COVID-19 pandemic and how to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression among UiTM Puncak Alam lecturers during ODL.

Material and Method

Study design

This study was conducted using a qualitative method with a phenomenology design to achieve the objective

of exploring the lecturers’ feelings and experiences in attending the ODL session during the COVID-19 pandemic and to explore ways to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression among UiTM Puncak Alam lecturers during ODL. The interview session was conducted face-to-face (FTF) inside the lecturer’s office for around 15 to 20 minutes using an audio recorder until the research objectives/questions had been reached for each participant. The researcher collected the data using the semi-structured interview guide to guide the interview session.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

When conducting this study, certain criteria were considered in selecting the participants from the population. All full-time lecturers from the Faculty of Health Sciences who have undergone ODL for at least one semester were recruited in this study. While lecturers with a diagnosed mental disorder or family history of related disorders and lecturers with unpaid leave, maternity leave, and studying leave were excluded from the study.

Data collection procedure

The researcher contacted the participants to set up an interview session using a face-to-face interview. The interview session was conducted for around 15 to 20 minutes or until the research objectives had been reached for each respondent. The semi-guided interview guide was used to answer the research questions. A total number of 12 participants were included in the interview sessions since the 12th participant was considered data was saturated where there was no emerging of a new theme. Several interview sessions were conducted with each participant. Each session included three to four interview participants at a time. After one session, the researcher will analyze the interview to identify the themes found in the interview session. The interview session continued until no new themes were identified. In this data collection activity, four sessions were successfully conducted where the data had become saturated as no new themes were discovered. Data were analyzed using manual transcription and Atlas t.i software. Themes were identified by thoroughly reading all the transcribed writing and doing the coding manually. The interview script was translated into English as the interviews were conducted bilingually. A language expert then reviews this translation before being confirmed. Table 1 shows the method used in the data collection procedure.

Table 1: The method used in the data collection procedure.

Method	Face-to-face in-depth interview Using Semi-structured online interview
Medium	Zoom or Face-to-Face live recording is preferred
Sample	Estimated 20 participants until saturated data achieved.
Estimated Time Required	15-20 minutes per person

Ethical consideration

This study obtained permission from the UiTM Research Ethics Committee REC/12/2021 (UG/MR/1144) dated the 14th of February 2022 until the 31st of May 2022. An information sheet regarding the study was given to be read before consent-taking. The participants involved in this study were aware of the study’s objectives and gave informed consent. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they may decline or withdraw from the study.

Data Analysis

The data collection, management, and analysis were all done at the same time. Within 24 hours of the interview, researchers transcribed the audio recordings verbatim into writing. To aid data analysis, the audio recordings were transcribed into text and supplemented with field notes providing nonverbal clues from the participants. Data were manually analysed by two researchers. The first step was to read the transcript several times in order to grasp the significance of the data and become familiar with it. The second stage was to generate the initial codes by identifying meaningful statements from phrases and sentences using a color-coding algorithm. All actual data extracts were coded in this step. The meanings and starting codes were then removed and entered into a tabular structure in order to compile each code by examining its relevance. The third stage was looking for prospective themes and sub-themes by clustering and categorizing all appropriate codes and data extracts. The fourth phase was to review and refine themes by comparing external heterogeneity across themes and internal homogeneity within themes, taking into account the level of coded data extracts as well as the whole data set. The fifth step was defining and labelling the themes to determine their essence. The last step was to write the report by choosing compelling examples and connecting them to the study question. The quote examples were given in the participants’ own words to ensure precision. In several meetings, three authors reviewed and discussed the themes and sub-themes during the analysis process. Any inconsistencies were discussed with all co-authors in study team meetings in order to establish an agreement. It aided the verbal interview data processing as an additional data source by referring to the field notes. Finally, a comprehensive description of the observed occurrences was written.

Rigor

Several strategies were used to achieve methodological rigor, credibility, and trustworthiness. First, the interviewers were senior students who built mutual trust with the participants through pre-interview engagement. Second, data were collected and analyzed using triangulation. Three researchers independently assessed data from diverse sources (field notes and audio recordings). Several of these newly developing themes were compared to the original transcribed text to confirm that the subjects guided the data analysis and interpretation. Third, peer debriefings

were done on a regular basis among the members of the research team. To improve the dependability and accuracy of the outcomes, the data analysis results were reviewed and discussed until a consensus was reached. Table 1, Semi-structured interview guide, was used to show the audit trails. Note: To ensure that the data collecting and analysis stages could be traced back to the original interviews, open-ended questions and probe questions such as perception of the initial clinical practice, the challenges experienced by the student during clinical attachment, and interest in nursing were utilised.

Reflectivity of the Study

Reflectivity is an important aspect of qualitative research because it can help researchers detect their biases and avoid subjective influences on the findings. Aida Awani, Hermiana and Siti Nurliyana, two members of the research team, have bachelor’s degrees in nursing science, while another researcher has PhD and master’s degrees in nursing science (Sharifah Shafinaz). All of the researchers are women who have received formal training in qualitative research methods, either as part of their schooling or as part of their continuing education. The members of the research team have a long history of clinical nursing and scientific research work under their belts. Researchers kept a reflectivity diary for constant self-censorship, reflection, and bracketing to avoid the influence of their personal experiences, views, and preconceptions on the analysis and interpretation of the research data.

RESULT

A total of 12 participants, consisting of 4 males and 8 females with the mean age of 43 agreed to participate. Table 2 provides the characteristics of the participants.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of participants (n = 12)

Characteristics	n	Percentages (%)
Gender		
Male	4	33.3%
Female	8	66.7%
Age		
27-34	4	33.3%
35-42	6	50.0%
43-50	2	16.7%
51-60	0	0%
Duration of ODL		
1-2 semester	2	16.7%
3-4 semester	2	16.7%
5-6 semester	8	66.7%

Thematic analysis of the online interview session transcriptions resulted in six themes and fourteen sub-

themes that represent the participants’ feelings, challenges, and ways to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Table 3 represents the said themes and subthemes.

Table 3: Themes and subthemes

Objectives of the study	Themes	Subthemes
To explore the lecturers’ feelings and experiences in attending the ODL session during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Unpleasant feeling during ODL	Participants feel less fun, lack of satisfaction, and less interaction with students. Participants complaint of stress, shock, and anxiety.
	Convenience feeling during ODL	Participants felt it is adjustable for them to attend class and do house chores. ODL save their travelling time to the office. They have extra family bonding time. It is protective and prevention measure of pandemic COVID-19
To explore the lecturers’ feelings and experiences in attending the ODL session during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Preparation for implementing ODL	Participants having difficulty in handling devices such as laptop, tablet, and computer. Poor internet connection. Time management prior to ODL.
	Teaching and learning dissatisfaction	Unsatisfaction with student’s participation during the class. They have a limited approach to evaluate students’ performances. Only one-way interaction occurs during class.
To explore ways on how to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression among UiTM Puncak Alam lecturers during ODL.	Application of ‘me time’ concept Early preparation for ODL	They distract themselves by doing their hobbies. Plan the arrangement and preparation for class. Plan strategies to enhance students’ participation during ODL

Themes and Subthemes

Thematic analysis of the online interview session transcriptions resulted in six themes and fourteen sub-

themes that represent the lecturers' feelings, challenges, and ways to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression.

Theme 1: Unpleasant feeling during ODL

The feelings of lecturers in attending the ODL session during the COVID-19 pandemic elicited the theme of unpleasant feelings during ODL. Most of the lecturers felt unpleasant emotions, whether they had advantages or disadvantages. They felt and expressed that ODL brought a stressful and difficult environment to adapt to this pandemic. This is the reason why there were some of them might have mental disturbance in the quantitative phase. As they experienced the ODL, they also reported mixed feelings and were unsure whether they could adapt to the ODL. Some of them also mentioned that each person will have different experiences and feelings from each other. All the participants expressed that this theme was consistent with the quantitative finding in this study, in which they felt stress, anxious, and anxiety during the pandemic in attending ODL sessions.

Two subthemes derived from them of unpleasant feelings during ODL namely, less fun, lack of satisfaction, less interaction with students, and feelings of stress, shock, and anxiety. The following explanations provide more detail about each subtheme.

Participants feel less fun, lack of satisfaction, and less interaction with students: Less fun, lack of satisfaction, and less interaction with students are some of the subthemes that fall under the theme of unpleasant feelings during ODL. The majority of lecturers expressed not having pleasure, enjoyment, and good communication with students. Besides, participants also mentioned that it was hard to do and had a lot of difficulties, especially for people in middle age. As a result of the above effect, lecturers reported having stress, anxiety, and depression during ODL. Below are the selected quotes from lecturers during the online session that reflect the subtheme of less fun, lack of satisfaction, and less interaction with students.

"In my personal opinion, ODL was less fun, lack of satisfaction, just talk to the camera, interaction between the students is less." (FTF1, P1)

"During the initial phase, we had a lot of difficulties, especially for people middle age like me means that I was not too millennium but trying to adapt with the technologies, such as how to give lecturer and to prepare the modules. It's difficult for the first semester in March until June but then the current semester, the students could return to campus so most of us was in hybrid phase which means there was online lecturer but also there was lab and tutorial that have been doing face-to-face." (FTF4, P3)

"In my opinion, work from home was a little bit difficult for me to handle." (FTF3, P1)

"For the first time so it's a bit difficult for me for our first time. So, try to learn how to use all the platforms. So, during my session I'm using a Microsoft team platform. So, every day I'm still searching." (FTF1, P3)

"Not be able to. Not be able to perform as usual when it comes to teaching or lecturing. Not, uh seeing students as uh, what, uh, I should, okay mean that without face to face I can't hardly know my students." (FTF4, P1)

Participants' complaints of stress, shock, and anxiety:

Stress, shock, and anxiety are another subtheme under the theme of unpleasant feelings during ODL. The majority of the lecturers frequently mentioned that they felt negative feelings during the ODL. The quotes below support the said subtheme.

"Besides that, the feeling sometimes felt stress because class were back-to-back facing the computer." (FTF 1, P1)

"Mixed feelings. It's a stress at first because the technology is still new." (FTF3, P2)

"Uh, if personally I'm also quite shocked, I'm quite shocked at the first time because knowing that uhm. Thinking that I'm at my hometown, how I'm going to continue my work? What will happen? Because there are a lot of uncertainties." (FTF2, P3)

"You know, when I come back and continue working from home at my home where I live right now. So, at that time I think if talking about feeling is quite anxious, it's quite anxious, a little bit like anxious in a way that. Because a lot of things happened, the kids also study at home and then juggle with the house chores at the same time, so. Somehow, I started to feel that anxious feeling. I felt my work was not organized and in a good manner, afraid that my work could not be done and there was a little bit of anxiousness. This kind of thing is like. OK, so I did develop a little bit much anxiety such as when I wake up in the morning, I felt anxious." (FTF2, P3)

"Uh, stress may be a little bit, especially if, uh, if there's something wrong with my equipment. With the.... facility went to doing the online teaching for classes, so how to cope or how to? Handle it instead of stress." (FTF4, P1)

Theme 2: Convenience feeling during ODL

The lecturers' feelings had allowed for the theme of convenience feeling during ODL to emerge. Some of the lecturers described conducting ODL as having a positive effect on their lives. Three subthemes are covered under this theme: adjustable doing class and house chores, saving travelling time, and family bonding time.

Participants felt it is adjustable for them to attend class and do house chores:

This subtheme of adjustable doing class and house chores falls under the theme of convenience during ODL. The lecturers involved in the online interview stated that ODL brings benefits to them in handling time management. The lecturers commented as follows.

"Apart from that, if we had face-to-face, we had to chase and run again to another lecture hall. If the ODL, we had to do the preparation and then just connect the laptop. But if it's so tired so I would take the break and go drink water." (FTF2, P1)

"In terms of home affairs, I felt I don't have any bothers, because I can't go out from home. I also can cook when there was no class, and I could anytime ready again for the class." (FTF2, P2)

"In terms of we don't have to travel to the office was easier and more convenient and traveling in between after class. We also can cook at home and do house chores." (FTF 2, P3)

ODL saves their traveling time to the office:

The next subtheme is saved traveling time. The lecturer perceived that ODL helped them save travelling time, so the lecturer did not have to rush to the office for teaching. Below are the statements that portray the subtheme of saving traveling time.

"Besides that, it also saved time because we don't need to drive to the office, chase early in the morning at 6 o'clock. I used to stay at Subang, so I had to drive from home at 6.30 if my class was at 8 o'clock to avoid the heavy traffic. It's worth getting out early to get up early rub your shirt and think about the trip to work so this ODL brought more benefit for me as I don't have to do all sorts of things. If ODL, at 7.30am I'm ready and prepared to enter the class and if our mindset was ready." (FTF2, P1)

"In terms of we don't have to travel to the office was easier and more convenient and traveling in between after class." (FTF2, P3)

They have extra family bonding time:

The next subtheme under convenience feeling during ODL is family bonding time. Lecturers agreed that ODL made them feel more lovely and caring with family members. The lecturers believed that their relationship with other family members tightened their bonding. The online session interview lecturers recounted as follows.

"My children have all grown up, so they all have separate classes and, I had a lot of time with the family. When we break from 10 am to 2 pm we must cook. Other than that, I'm happy because I had time with my family" (FTF2, P1)

"These are also the benefits that I get from the pandemic, I also can see my children study in front of my eyes. I have a lot of time spent with my children, we saw what they did and that made me feel lighthearted." (FTF2, P3).

It is a protective and preventive measure of the COVID-19 pandemic:

The protective and prevention measure of COVID-19 was one of the sub-themes under convenience feeling during

ODL. There was a lecturer who stated that he felt positive about ODL. The comment of the lecturer is as follows.

"And that is a I would say save, save and uh also. A bit convenient. A bit convenient to use, considering that a pandemic is still on. So, a kind of what we call umm. Protective or preventive measure from the spread of COVID-19." (FTF 4, P1)

Theme 3: Preparation for implementing ODL

In this study, the lecturers' challenges in attending the ODL session during the COVID-19 pandemic elicited the theme of preparation for implementing ODL. Most of the lecturers have difficulties and challenges during ODL, especially in handling technical devices and also the internet connection. All the lecturers expressed that this theme was consistent in this study since the majority of them agreed with the statement.

Three subthemes derived from the theme of preparation for implementing ODL namely, difficulty handling technical devices, poor internet connection, and time management prior to ODL. The following explanations provide more detail about each subtheme.

Participants having difficulty in handling devices such as laptops, tablets, and computers:

The difficulty handling technical devices is one of the subthemes that fall under the theme preparation for implementing ODL. Below are the selected quotes from lecturers during online interview sessions that reflect the subtheme of difficulty handling technical devices.

"Then he or she had a problem with the laptop. For example, sometimes the laptop doesn't work well." (FTF1, P1)

"Okay, the challenges were, firstly about the equipment and devices for example we already had the laptop, but the other equipment was needed in some parts of our teaching for the recording and the live calculation session." (FTF 4, P3)

"And the other challenges were not only for our mental but also my work design. At home, we did not have a suitable workplace and work design, but it depends on the lecturers itself but for me I'm not having a good working designation at home and then there were disturbs from family members, the environment and disturb from many parts including my designation of work was not suitable for examples the chair, table were not suitable to work." (FTF 3, P1)

Poor internet connection:

Poor internet connection is another subtheme under the theme of preparation for implementing ODL. Most lecturers agreed that this is the main factor contributing to difficulties in conducting ODL between lecturers and students. The quotes below support the said subtheme.

"Somehow in the morning, the internet connection was less stable and after 2 o'clock it became more stable because at

that time everyone was using it. But somehow there also some lagging period throughout the ODL.”(FTF3, P2)

“For me, the internet connection was a problem too but it’s not a big deal for me, if I’m being rated, my rating was 4/5.”(FTF3, P3)

“The coverage internet, students kept log in and log out during the class, initial phase to prepare the document or content for teaching and learning activities especially topic that included calculation.” (FTF 4, P3)

“Some of the students we understand when it’s near the house, the internet connection is not strong. Besides that, the students maybe lived near the rural area, so the internet access is limited so we understand.” (FTF1, P1)

“Of course, in terms of internet connection. I know when online it’s going to be that the students have constraints in terms of internet access.” (FTF1, P2)

“There was lack of internet, sometimes the internet was disconnected, and the data connection was lost.” (FTF 2, P1)

“The challenge would be that both parties’ students and lecturers are having a bad Internet connection. Maybe for the lecturer, they already like in the office but for students at home struggling with the internet. Maybe they already like the office, so if the network is stable but not so does the Internet. K uh students most likely were struggling at home. Oh, kind, so on our part. We already might. Some can’t settle down a bit so. Uhm, having to say that make sure that we have an adequate Internet connection.” (FTF 2, P3)

“Yeah, Internet connection can be problematic as well. Can have their ups and downs so that that one of the challenges. Yeah, that perhaps you want to take notice and. Yeah, maybe those are challenges in terms of the communication or interaction with students and no face-to-face regarding Internet connection.” (FTF 4, P1)

“OK, if you ask me about the challenges that most of us as a lecturer face during the ODL session mostly related to the Internet connection. Of course, about Internet connection, the first one about Internet connection and the second one due to what I mean the learning and teaching session.” (FTF 4, P2)

“The networking, so sometimes my networking is not OK. Sometimes, my students’ networking is not OK, so I’ve been receiving some of the uh, private message me and text me saying that they have an issue with their networking because at that time during the pandemic. In 2020 and early 2021. So, all the students are in their hometowns, right? They are returning to their hometown, so some are in a very rural area. Their networking is not so good, so that is a big challenge for me and for the students as well.”(FTF1, P3).

Time management prior to ODL:

The third subtheme under preparation for implementing ODL is time management prior to ODL. The following are the quotes that reflect the said subtheme.

“So, it’s very challenging for me to work at home was not only 8 hours but more than the period and also did the work at midnight apart from the problems from the working design. When we were at home, we had to cook while doing house chores (I could see the stress that Dr wanted to express during the past online distance learning and her face was not lying) we had to manage the house chores while doing work. Hence, it was really challenging for me.” (FTF 3, P1)

“We are coming back to the office, but our kids are still at home because they are not going to school yet. School of college, So still have difficulty into of arrangement.....When we arrived at the office, I felt quite tired and challenged to do all that thing, to rush to do ODL at the office.We tended to extend our work, and meeting at one point, the meeting continued late at night, it pretty much that there were no boundaries between work and our own time. So, you can do the meeting everywhere and every time that you want, the boundaries are gone. Also, at that time everyone was like oh anything or at any time you can do your work, to be truth.” (FTF2, P3)

Theme 4: Teaching and learning dissatisfaction.

The lecturers’ challenges in attending the ODL session during the COVID-19 pandemic had allowed for the theme of teaching and learning dissatisfaction to emerge. There are three subthemes covered under this theme namely, students’ participation, limited approach to evaluate student performance, and one-way interaction.

Unsatisfaction with students’ participation during the class:

The subtheme of students’ participation falls under the theme of teaching and learning dissatisfaction. The lecturers commented as follows.

“Then, from students’ opinions whether they focus or understand towards the learning in this online session in addition to their attitude behaviors for example when we were teaching in class, we cannot fully monitor our students, either they kept attention or was doing something else.”(FTF4, P3)

“It’s very different because I did not see students’ faces. We’re not sure the student’s got that concentration or not.”(FTF3, P3)

“I’m strictly said that I didn’t get the teaching satisfaction because I didn’t get the feedbacks from students.”(FTF 1, P1)

Limited approach to evaluate student performance:

The next subtheme is a limited approach to evaluating student performance. The lecturers commented as follows.

“The third factor that I think is, uh, you cannot evaluate directly your students’ performance because you just communicate directly with your own computer OK you

cannot. You cannot justify whether your student is really learning or not understanding but what we are discussing right now.”(FTF 4, P2)

Only one-way interaction occurs during class:

The next subtheme is one-way interaction between lecturers and students which means the lecturer cannot see the face of students. So it will bring unpleasant for lecturers to continue the class. Below are the statements that portray the subtheme of one-way interaction.

“If in online class, there were some of students would be sleeping or did other things and we also didn’t know what they were doing. Some of them came to lab but didn’t on the camera.”(FTF 2, P1)

“Other than that, like I said, we don’t know what he’s doing there because he’s not on camera either he’s sleeping what other things that he’s did, it’s hard to think well when he’s didn’t on the camera, so the expectation him to focus was not in a good concentration but I knew what’s going on.”(FTF 1, P1)

“and it turned out the students were left the class meeting.”(FTF 4, P3)

Theme 5: Application of “me time” concept

The lecturers’ challenges in attending the ODL session during the COVID-19 pandemic in this study elicited the theme of application of “me time” concept. Most of the lecturers had their own ways or strategies to cope with their own stress, anxiety, and depression on conducting ODL during COVID-19.

For this theme, there is only one subtheme, which is engaging in hobbies. The following explanations provide more details about each subtheme.

They distract themselves by doing their hobbies:

Doing hobbies is the only subtheme for the theme application of the “me time” concept. Below are the selected quotes from the online interview session.

“Try to practice a healthy living style although we cannot go outside as well. For example, doing some exercise with family in the yard. Besides that, in my opinion, spending time with our kids is the best moment to remember.”(FTF 2, P3)

“Covid I also attended a course. It is for a new lecturer, so how we want to conduct that course in that short cost is about one week course, so we have been taught how to conduct it. Uh and attractive session.”(FTF 1, P3)

“In my opinion, the thing I like to do is cook. For me, cooking is the best treatment for releasing stress (she stated that while laughing and I can see the happiness).”(FTF 2, P2)

“If the past quarantine period, usually I would do planting and sightseeing the plants around my house.”(FTF 3, P3)

“If I’m at home, if I felt very miserable, I would go to take a shower for refresh again (She laughed by her statement maybe she also found funny about that).” (FTF 3, P1)

“The second one was we should take our leisure time watching television or Netflix to reduce the stress. The problem is that we had to forget first and did something that makes me happy.”(FTF 4, P3)

“I’ve got an approach indeed to go out, go take the kids to eat out or go to the park. I’ve got a must-have method out. Other than that, it’s possible to sleep (she smiled at me). Sleep maybe took a nap.”(FTF 1, P1)

Theme 6: Early preparation for ODL

In this study, the lecturers’ challenges in attending the ODL session during the COVID-19 pandemic elicited the theme of early preparation for ODL. There are two last subthemes of the ways to cope with stress, anxiety, and depression during ODL namely, arrangement for classes and strategies to enhance students’ participation.

Plan the arrangement and preparation for class:

One of the subthemes of early preparation for ODL is an arrangement for classes. Following below are the quotes from lecturers.

“We had to be flexible on time management, especially during ODL because of our packed schedule. The schedule cannot be changed but we could make some alterations, for example we could skip the class a little bit or finish the class a little bit earlier to that. After the middle of the class, we have a 5 min break.” (FTF 1, P1)

“If we’re going to do the ODL we had to make sure, tomorrow the internet was good and stable. If it’s the end of the month, I’ll check and top4 the Wi-Fi.” (FTF 2, P1)

“So, I just proceed the learning and teaching session just I handle with the time management, I shortened the class session so that we can leave early.” (FTF 4, P2)

Strategies to enhance students’ participation:

The last subtheme under early preparation for ODL is strategies to enhance students’ participation. Following below are the quotes from lecturers.

“Students were bored so I’m going to do a quiz, so they’re not bored. Make a discussion into zoom and the 2-hour time was not just a lecture.” (FTF 2, P1)

“Yes, we understand that if the students on video they will be slow and lagging again so for me, I will teach online as well as recording. So, students can recall, and I’m open to contact anytime, for questions or discussions.” (FTF 1, P2)

“For example, I had to do online classes at the office or home just maybe I would have problem if things not going well with my equipment.”(FTF 4, P1)

From the online interview session, thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected, which was later organized into themes and subthemes. All themes and subthemes are explained, followed by quotes that reflect the meaning of the subthemes. In conclusion, all lecturers in UiTM Puncak Alam who were involved in the online interview session had only mild stress and anxiety but not to the extent of feeling depressed. In conclusion, the stress that lecturers are going through is manageable and can improve their mental health of life.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the lecturers' feelings and experiences in conducting the ODL session during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the data collected, most of the lecturers stated that at first, they felt mixed feelings and had a difficult period with the new norms of Online Distance Learning (ODL) but along the way they started to readapt to this new system and got used to it since now the country had been in endemic phase. When the lecturers reflected again on their difficulties during the pandemic, they found that the ODL brought good advantages to them despite having a bad impact. One of the benefits was in terms of communication and a good way of learning, both of the lecturers and students could still continue the learning session through online class without the effect of being face-to-face. The qualitative study expanded our understanding of the psychological process people underwent. Participants described their sense of shock and chaos at the outbreak of the epidemic, followed by a gradual process of adjustment to the new situation along with fears and concerns for their welfare and that of their loved ones (6, 7). The result of their study proved the same theme as our study because most of the lecturers felt shocked and anxious during the first time having ODL, especially at home, and also there was a lecturer who had ODL in the village.

Moreover, this research also proposed exploring ways to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression among UiTM Puncak Alam lecturers during ODL. Most of the lecturers' strategies to cope with stress were the application of the "me time" concept, such as having a variety of hobbies. The lecturers stated that doing the activities that they loved was the best treatment to cope with their stress like cooking, gardening, watching *Netflix*, and etc. Some of them emphasized using their own ways to cope with it. Besides that, early preparation for ODL was one of the ways that lecturers cope with stress, anxiety and depression, such as arranging classes and strategies to enhance student participation. The data support the theory and the findings in our literature review, which conclude that the lecturers who worked from home faced difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as spending the entire working day with families, infants, and kids, or elderly parents at home (6-9).

In addition, other studies expressed more experiences and challenges for lecturers in conducting ODL during the pandemic phase. Several studies reported that the lecturers had to learn to use the learning management system before conducting online classes in the shortest possible time with little training and preparation (7, 10-12). Studies also reported that the lecturers used their phone network to do teaching preparation, online tutorials, and stay connected with students (10-12). Besides that, lecturers need to change the assessments to suit the online learning environment, for instance, converting the final exams to coursework or take-home exams. Fourthly, marking assessments online exposes lecturers to computer vision syndrome (2, 6, 10-13), as lecturers must use computers for long hours to read and provide feedback electronically. Besides, answering endless students' questions via email has been a daily routine since the pandemic outbreak. Thus, this occurrence caused much depression, anxiety, and stress among lecturers.

Next, research done by Al Lily et al. in 2020, that aimed to identify the correlation of sociodemographic data such as gender, age, and place of implementing ODL mental health of college students also stated that there were limitations that affected the studies rather than the sociodemographic data such as external factors (13). The external factors include when and where the survey was completed by the participants (13-15) also agreed that the emotional state of participants while completing the survey may affect the results and findings rather than demographic data. Even though the findings found that most of the female participants tend to have higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress, some of the male participants showed a severe level of depression due to external factors. This finding supports the previous study done by Leili & Khazali (16) where female participants were more frequent in developing these psychological symptoms. A study by Leili & Khazali also stated that there are many theories about why females are more likely to develop anxiety disorder than males (16). Studies conducted by Leili and Khazali (16) as well as Tolin and Foa (17) have reported that psychological differences might also help explain these gender gaps. For example, men may rise to believe more in their personal control over the situation, a variable protective against anxiety disorders (16). Social factors like gender roles are also likely to play a role. Men may experience more social pressure than women to face fears (facing fears is one of the most effective treatments (16-17). Women face different life circumstances than men. For example, women are much more likely than men to be sexually assaulted during childhood and adulthood (17). Therefore, conducting a qualitative study with in-depth interviews were done to gain more data regarding the feelings and challenges faced during ODL and ways to cope with depression, anxiety, and stress for those participants who showed mild to severe level of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Conclusion

People were very shocked during the pandemic of COVID-19 where MCO was ordered, and it caused people to totally panic due to the restricted order. People must stay at home and were not allowed to go outside even for school and work (18). Therefore, alternatives were initiated to keep the economy and academics going well even though the world was facing the outbreak of COVID-19. Unfortunately, a sudden change towards new norms has caused stress, anxiety, and depression in the community. Therefore, proper management and better working conditions are the best ways to prevent stress in working (3). At the time people were adapting to the norms, and also, they had found their ways to cope with their stress. This study discussed the COVID-19 process experience of lecturers. The study's findings indicate the qualitative result as the lecturers adapted to the endemic phase. Although many factors lead to stress, anxiety, and depression, the lecturers stated that they could cope with it by taking the initiative, such as having a "me time" concept. These situations had both beneficial and bad effects on lecturers. Previous researchers expressed that to emphasize the need for lecturers to be creative, innovative, and scientifically minded in coping with these problems, they should also have strong problem-solving and communication skills, a working knowledge of their subject area, and be open to technological advancement (18-20). Limitations of the study concern the small sample size, limiting the generalizability of the results. Even though several interviewees made similar statements, additional interviews with further lecturers might have contributed to a broader variety of statements. Despite the limitation mentioned above, the results provide an indication that ODL had the psychological impact on the lecturers. All the hurdles during the ODL should be addressed to deliver quality teaching and learning sessions in the future.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical Clearance

We obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee Universiti Teknologi MARA with reference number REC/12/2021 (UG/MR/1144) dated the 14th of February 2022 until the 31st of May 2022).

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