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**The Rise of Students' Social Anxiety during COVID-19
Online Learning**

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces us to one of the psychological disorder tendencies reflected in students during COVID-19 pandemic and online learning. The research objectives of this research consist in: (1) Identification of students' interaction during COVID-19 teaching and learning process; (ii) Understanding students' psychological wellbeing during online learning in COVID-19 pandemic times; (iii) Comparison of the Albanian students' academic wellbeing with other students in the world. Therefore, the research questions of the study are as the following: Which are the students' stressors during COVID-19 online learning? How is students' psychological wellbeing during online learning process in COVID-9 pandemics? How similar are our students' reactions in comparison to other students in the world? Literature review and qualitative research data was collected in Albanian students living and studying in Albania. Content analysis was provided reporting effects of the lacked social interaction during the online learning in COVID-19 pandemic times; a rise of the social anxiety was self-reported from students. Findings show that Albanian students' psychological reaction was consistent in nature with other students being exposed to the same online learning environment in the world.

Keywords: social anxiety, students' psychological reaction, psychological disorders, COVID-19 online learning

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Introduction

COVID-19 breakthrough introduced us to many insecurities and issues we could not properly understand. Productivity has been lowered not only in terms of learning but seen even in economic terms. Findings from a cross sectional research study report that “COVID-19 pandemic has affected the performance and survival of businesses” and therefore it was associated with: firm productivity, customer retention, increased unemployment rate (Adejare et al. 2021). Throughout a selective research review in COVID-19 in Atiner’s journal it was reported that students in Slovenia showed a decrease in motivation and difficulty in studying (Boutsioli et al. 2022). Moreover, research shows that students’ wellbeing is on the strike during the online learning since they miss interaction with their peers and teachers. There was evidence of the positive approach towards online learning however, mainly due to its flexibility.

A qualitative research study conducted during the third COVID-19 wave aiming to understand the health consequences in adolescents and young adults’ report that students in university level show more negative impacts in relationships with their peers and teachers and other concerns including: sleeping, eating and screen time, showing signs of ‘pandemic fatigue’ (Branquinho et al. 2022). Further studies conducted in G20 countries focusing on students’ health and wellbeing during COVID-19, which was happening in virtual communication found that “students’health and wellbeing were not addressed in these G20 countries” (Nurunnabi et al. 2020). This article investigates on Albanian students’ wellbeing and mental health has been during the online learning communication with their peers and instructors. Objectives of the study are presented as below: (i)Identification of students’ interaction during COVID-19 teaching and learning process; (ii)Understanding students’ psychological wellbeing during online learning in COVID-19 pandemic times; (iii)Comparison of the Albanian students’ academic wellbeing with other students in the world.

The research questions of the study are as the following: RQ 1. Which are the students’ stressors during COVID-19 online learning? RQ 2. How is students’ psychological wellbeing during online learning process in COVID-19 pandemics? RQ 3. How similar are our students’ reactions in comparison to other students in the world?

Methodology

For this article data was gathered throughout two sources: articles published over the last years on COVID-19 pandemic and data gathered throughout a qualitative study conducted during Fall 2021 to Albanian students. The instrument used consists in the interview tool including dominating open questions on students’ social interaction during the online learning process.

The interview guideline consisted in a number of sections such as age, gender and major of study. 25 participants were interviewed. In this article we focus on the analysis of a number of open-questions referring to psychological wellbeing and academic performance during online learning.

Discussion and Results

Reduced Social Interaction and Online Learning

Students' perception about the importance of learning and academic performance were important variables in the study. Therefore, research expanded in the understanding of students' perception about learning during the pandemic and the way how their expectations would be in the upcoming academic year. *Related to students*, it appears to be addressed a number of questions related to the online learning. During the pandemic lessons were provided online, but is internet harnessing education or it is a new mode of teaching and learning (Atwong and Hugstad 1997)? Researchers (Hunt et al. 2004) suggest that acceptance of "new technologies in education will rely heavily on the ability of educational institutions to manage the change process". Students' perception regarding the online learning strives for different perspectives. Research suggests that students' perceptions of how much they mattered to their peers during the in-person versus online learning was important and it contributed to having students who are more resilient, feel protected and are more engaged (Vaillancourt et al. 2022).

Referring to research conducted in Australia the online learning has affected learning in general and students' wellbeing, highlighting problems especially for the undergraduate students (Dodd et al. 2021). Research in South Africa reports that students' wellbeing has been compromised leading to numbness, detached relationships, overthinking, changes of weight, feeling isolate, trapped and their basic support system is their family or extended family (Laher et al. 2021). Research (Holzer 2021) highlights that a series of competences, the presence of autonomy and self-regulated learning approach from students during online learning may lead to a positive wellbeing for university students. But do students have these competences and such an inner oriented accountability related to learning?

Related to lecturers: In online courses lecturers need to be skillful in using technology and even strategies for strengthening students' community in the class. Research (Parish et al. 2021) shows that students perceive that the development of a sense of classroom community is important in promoting satisfaction and connection between peers and the lecturer. However, the perceived quality of the online learning is related to the nature of the lecturers outside of the traditional classroom, mentoring issues, course structure and other factors related to the design and delivery of the information (Peltier et al. 2007). Study suggests that in online courses students are hesitant in providing support or appraising accomplishment to their peers if there has not been built

a community where learners share interactive roles with each other (Conaway et al. 2005). Students' perception about fairness in grading during the online learning seems to be very important. In research conducted with marketing students the authors cited that "perceptions of fairness and unfairness are not simple mirror images" (Houston and Bettencourt 1995). In this study some reported behaviors seemed unfair, but other behaviors were misinterpreted when actually there was no malicious intent from the instructor. Research focused on the transitioning remote learning, referred to this abrupt mode of teaching and learning named "pandemic pedagogy" (Cao et al. 2021), providing empirical support that students' satisfaction with the remote learning adjustment was linked with students' positive perceptions about the expected academic performance. Additionally, shared responsibility referring to perceiving themselves accountable in the learning and academic performance process was linked with students' satisfaction with remote learning. On the other side, students' learning styles (Fowler and Thomas 2015) need to be taken into consideration in times of not in person communication between lecturer and students.

Students' Psychological Wellbeing in COVID-19 Online Learning

Social Anxiety

Referring to the study conducted in Albania in Fall 2021 when universities where about to open, half of the participants reported social anxiety and even mentioned that they were "happy that classes would be online due to the presence of social anxiety", "gathering and university auditoriums would be stressful due to gathering and crowds". Comparing students' perception before and during the pandemic, 8/25 (32%) of the respondents has got anxiety issues, including generalized anxiety and social anxiety, which have become more problematic during the pandemic. The risen level of anxiety concerns is related with: sleeping and eating irregular patterns, the safety and health issues of their parents, pressure of grades and performance in university, relationship problems and finances. Other respondents reported that mental health had been compromised during the pandemic.

Worries about Social Interactions

Students perceived that isolation during the lockdown was a negative experience distancing them from their friends. However, 60% (15/25) of the participants declared that the isolation helped them become more selective in meeting with friends. They could finally find the courage to refuse meeting people justifying themselves due to isolation. On the other side, they were worried when perceiving themselves as no more sociable. Sometimes isolation was purposeful, "Quarantine served as a way to save myself from self-judgment from being not social".

Other participants reported developing an anxious attachment style and fear of abandonment from people they were related with while staying home during the lockdown. Three participants reported that due to social isolation they improved their relations with their partners and provided more time and dedication, sometimes even leading to complete dependency from each other. "Online learning was a failure; I am sure I did not receive the knowledge during that time. I lost the focus of the attention". Reduction of social interaction during the pandemic in 68% (17/25) of the cases strengthened their relationships with their family members. Not in all cases these strengthened relationship were rewarding for the students due to too much control and lack of independence from their families.

Comparing Other Students and Albanian Students Worries During the Pandemics

The optimism overview regarding mental health and wellbeing suggests that there is a positive association between optimism and coping strategies which is "focused on social support and positive aspects of stressful situations" (Conversano et al. 2010). In this view, students who act normally in situations of stress and difficulty without asking for help and use passive coping skills which are ineffective, have acquired faulty skills and patterns that are being maintained but which need to be replaced with better attributional styles. The passive seeking behavior of students in difficult times of the pandemic and the lack of trust in finding help from other people identified a lack of information and awareness of the young generation in taking care of their mental health. Students perceive as not necessary to ask for help to mental health professionals and neither they are encouraged from their family and friends to seek for this type of help. Students' barriers might be related to the lack of the awareness or fear of being blamed for their situation, worrying about being vulnerable toward mental health support. None of the students mentions having contacted their university counsellors and there is no information whether in their universities there is a relevant unit supporting the psychological wellbeing of students affecting their motivation and academic engagement.

"I have had very strong coping mechanisms that had been present through out my whole life, isolation affected my self worth negatively". "My Coping mechanism are quite unhealthy because I had the tendency to push people away and deal with things on my own not to seem weak".

Even though the majority of students were worried about academic accomplishments and performance, they reported to have had a higher academic performance which is not in line with the level of knowledge acquired. Regarding the performance of students, e.g., in a study in Jordan the usage of e-learning tools for hours has increased students' exposure to research and relevant materials that might help them better contextualize the new information in comparison to the in-person interaction in class (Al-Salman and

Haider 2021). However, the rise of academic performance with the presence of an increased anxiety and impairment in concentration do not represent strong predictors of academic success; this is not in line with the existing research. Research in Italy shows that the negative impact of the distance education has affected students' mental health presenting depressive symptoms and impairment in concentration and learning, the latter identified as the strongest predictors of poor academic performances" (Giusti et al. 2021). Students in Albania report to have a tendency to be reading online and overusing screen time, and they evaluate the scientific information, trying to avoid the discrepancies, but being in contact with the latest news. News fatigue is not an issue for them, as studies suggest 'no news does not mean there is no news' (Fitzpatrick 2022) it is just an avoidance mechanism.

Conclusions

For this study a body of research focused in latest articles about COVID-19 implication to students' wellbeing during the online learning has been reviewed, analyzed and compared with the data coming out of interviews conducted with Albanian students during the pandemic. Results show that students report a number of disturbances such as eating and sleeping disturbances, social anxiety, generalized anxiety and continuous worries and fear related to school, social connections and the future have been reflected in university students during the online learning process.

Social anxiety has been highlighted as the major trap of students because of not sharing issues responsibilities and neither asking for help and support when needed to their peers and lecturers. The support systems have not been utilized in case of help provided. All students, despite their major of study or country where living and conducting their studies, report to have the common issues in general, including lack of psychological wellbeing, difficulties in coping unknown and disaster situations and worries about their academic performance. Further research studies are recommended to be done aiming to spot any changes in students' perception and their wellbeing while they have all returned to being in-person in the university.

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