

Social Experiences of Tertiary Students Regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of the National University of Lesotho

Josphine Hapazari¹ and Thandie Hlabana²

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel Sars-CoV-2 coronavirus, has variously impacted most sectors globally, including social, economic and psychological impacts. This empirical study utilized a phenomenology approach to explore the social experiences of tertiary students regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in Lesotho. In this article, we argue that higher education students' social wellbeing is impacted by the occurrences within their surrounding environment, coupled with the reaction or lack of reaction to the tremors imposed on the environment. This qualitative study employed a purposive sampling technique to enrol 28 university students from the National University of Lesotho. An interview schedule was utilized, as a data collection instrument, to conduct in-depth interviews. All interviews were virtual, cognizant of existent COVID-19 pandemic regulations. The Social Impact Theory guided the crafting of interview questions and the data analysis process. The study established that the COVID-19 pandemic occasioned some limited positive social experiences to some students, such as increased spirituality and strengthened family bonds. However, the COVID-19 pandemic inflicted numerous negative experiences on university students' welfare, including loss of social capital, increased workload, stigma, weakened spirituality and hesitation to get vaccinated. Thus, COVID-19 directly impacts the social aspects of university students' lives. Consequently, this article recommends that the Government of Lesotho ought to conduct COVID-19 awareness campaigns, addressing not only preventive measures, but issues around stigma and hesitation to get vaccinated. The National University of Lesotho ought to avail free virtual counselling sessions to students in order for them to cope with social experiences emanating from the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings are envisaged to add knowledge to the higher education discourse and to shape higher education policy.

Keywords: COVID-19, Lesotho, social impact, stigma, tertiary students

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has brought about unprecedented and complex issues to all humanity. Since December 2019, when COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, the capital of China's Hubei province, it has spread globally, resulting in the continuing 2019–21 coronavirus pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. This led to the closure of schools and universities, the National University of Lesotho (NUL) included, as Lesotho imposed its first lockdown in March 2020. However, as of 15th June 2020, there were four (4) confirmed COVID-19 cases in Lesotho (UNDP, 2021). Reacting to the lockdown and closure of the institutions of learning, the National University of Lesotho activated online learning, which commenced in the first week of April 2020. This study aimed to identify and explore the experiences of the National University of Lesotho students regarding the COVID-19

¹ Part-time lecturer, Department of Sociology and Social Work, National University of Lesotho.
jbhiri.hapazari@gmail.com

² Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Social Work, National University of Lesotho.

pandemic. Focus was placed on the tertiary students' social lives during the COVID-19 outbreak, the period thereafter, until the date of conducting this study. There are seven faculties at the National University of Lesotho, namely, Science and Technology, Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Agriculture, Humanities, Law and Education. NUL was chosen as the research site because there had been a number of suicide attempts by students and other negative impacts, which were linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had negative impacts within higher education institutions socially, economically and academically. Mashinini (2020) established that COVID-19 caused the cancellation of inter-university sporting activities; this hampered the social relations that have gone on as an annual tradition among three universities – Botswana, Eswatini and Lesotho. Academically, online teaching is associated with a lot of challenges especially in poorly resourced universities and countries (Bao, 2020). Similarly, Mbambo-Thata (2020) observed that during the lockdown, the Government of Lesotho announced that it was working in partnership with two leading mobile operators to reduce the cost of data to students, and through a series of negotiations, the government, NUL management and mobile operators agreed to zero-rate student access to learning platforms. The challenges that were experienced by the National University of Lesotho students were mainly influenced by their personal attributes, pedagogical issues and how the university supported them (Makafane & Chere-Masupha, 2021). Lack of some conducive learning environment and resources such as electricity connectivity, its reliable supply, digital network connectivity, devices like computers, smartphones, and data hinder access to online learning by some learners (Harding & Brodie, 2020).

Online Learning at the National University of Lesotho

Prior the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the teaching and learning at the National University of Lesotho (NUL) was being conducted face-to-face. Regarding online teaching, learning and assessment, NUL utilizes a platform called Thuto, which was instituted in 2014. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most educators were not teaching online. The Thuto platform was mostly used for posting material for the various courses offered and posting announcements to students. NUL attested to the fact that the 'Resources' tool was being used more than the 'Lessons' tool. Tlali (2019) conducted a study before the COVID-19 pandemic and noted that teaching and learning were taking place through the use of face-to-face classes. Even though the NUL Learning Management System emphasizes that "students must be informed in good time if any part of their course or module will be assessed online, so that students are prepared in terms of resources (computer and internet access)", not all students can afford to use the internet. Therefore, this presents challenges to online learning, which ultimately diminishes students' academic performance and quality of life. This also explains why this study explored students' social experiences regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the Thuto platform has a grading tool called the 'Gradebook', which can be utilized to process students' marks or grades as well as provide feedback and performance records to students. Lack of financial support negatively impacts on some students' ability to access tools on Thuto and this is frustrating. However, tactics used by students to enhance online learning, such as group work and discussion tend to uphold social cohesion as will be explored in the findings section of this article.

Problem Statement and Rationale

Under normal circumstances, teaching and learning at higher education institutions is expected to be handled smoothly in order for students to fully benefit from the education

system. Any shocks that occur within these institutions negatively affect the social life and academic performance of students. Hence, some students may find it challenging to continue with their studies and this tends to have a huge impact to the development of any nation. The COVID-19 pandemic is one such shock that has hit higher education institutions since 2020. According to NUL (2020:10), the NUL Learning Management System is a tool to support teaching and learning. It does not replace the course instructors or facilitators; therefore, it should be used as part of the tools in a mixed approach comprising face-to-face educator-students interaction. However, on the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no face-to-face interactions between students and lecturers and this presented varied problems to the teaching and learning process. Thus, this pandemic has altered teaching and learning in most higher education institutions. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was not only confined to the academic arena but also to students' social lives. In this regard, the significance of this study is to unravel the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tertiary students at the National University of Lesotho so as to come up with suitable measures to address the challenges. Thus, the changing face of teaching and learning warrants investigation to establish how it is impacting students socially, given that such impacts also affect students' academic performance. Empirical studies of this nature are envisaged to influence higher education policy as well as contribute knowledge on factors that affect the teaching and learning at higher education institutions.

Research Questions

In light of the identified impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on online learning that were discussed in the introduction, online learning before the pandemic at the National University of Lesotho and the problem statement section above, the following research questions were posed:

- a) How has the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the social lives of students at the National University of Lesotho?
- b) How has the COVID-19 pandemic positively impacted the social lives of students at the National University of Lesotho?

Methodology

This study employed a phenomenology paradigm to unearth the negative and positive experiences of tertiary students in Lesotho. According to Van Manen (1990), phenomenology entails participants' perceptions of the meanings of events as opposed to events as they exist externally to the participants. This qualitative study utilized a case study research design. The research site was the National University of Lesotho. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 28 university students, four students from each of the seven faculties and from different programmes and year of study. This is the only state-owned university in Lesotho, with the other two universities being privately-owned. Data were collected between June and August 2021 using an interview schedule. In-depth interviews were conducted using a WhatsApp call facility, and students had to be provided with a data bundle since they were struggling financially. A pilot study was conducted before the main study. The interviews were conducted either at night or during weekends to avoid disturbing students during online lessons. Qualitative data analysis was used to come up with main themes and sub-themes. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the NUL. Furthermore, social sciences research ethics were observed, for instance, confidentiality, voluntary participation and anonymity. All the prospective participants were given consent forms which spelt out the aim

of the study and how the interviews were going to be conducted in order for them to make an informed decision on whether or not to participate in the study. Prospective participants were also told that they were free to ask any questions for further clarification. Those who agreed to participate were requested to sign consent forms. Participants were also informed that they were free to withdraw their participation without any consequences. All the participants were informed that data collected from the interviews was going to be used to write a paper for publication. To ensure anonymity, students' names were removed from the interviews and they were assigned numbers instead, from one to twenty-eight.

Literature Review

The literature review focused on the social impact of COVID-19 on university students worldwide. Findings related to online education showed that COVID-19, to a moderate level, impacted both positively and negatively on the online education aspect of students' lives. Enhancing social interaction among students in online education was the main advantage of online education throughout the curfew period. The online education environment entails two sets of interrelating styles: the first one consists of students, instructors and materials, while the second entails technologies and methods of communication (Seymour-Walsh et al., 2020). However, a study conducted by Barnes and Noble College Insights with 432 college students across the USA, showed that over half of the students were concerned about the lack of social interaction in the online learning environment, with only 12% being concerned about the speed of internet access (Barnes, 2020). The existing education system and the uneven distribution of resources have often been blamed for the widening gaps between the haves and have nots. In the advent of COVID-19 the digital divide and the e-resources will widen the gaps even more by flaring the inequalities between the advantaged and disadvantaged college students (Kumari, 2020).

Regarding the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, 54% of learners strongly agreed that they did not attend online classes frequently due to insufficient funds (Kumari, 2020). Consistent with other people, the students had no sources of income due to the shutting of businesses and factories during the lockdown (Kumari, 2020). In another study, Stirling et al. (2015) developed a programme during an infectious period of the MERS-COV epidemic for Saudi students and faculty members of the College of Nursing at Princess Nourah University to support the emotional and informational needs of the students and staff who had the capability to be conduits for the spread of disease to the wider population in the midst of a pandemic. Due to lack of social interaction, learners' speaking and communication skills are debilitated. Some learners have a compulsion to sell fruits and vegetables because their parents are unemployed; but this cannot take place due to COVID-19 regulations (Kumari, 2020). Sahu (2020) highlights negative educational and mental health impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of university students. These impacts include failure to submit assignments on time and to fully comprehend material taught online.

Alghamdi (2021) opines that migrating from face-to-face classes to online classes is not a simple step for students, particularly those who do not have the means to acquire laptops and internet facilities at home or those who take courses that cannot be taught online. He further argues that the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on students' education and mental health could also affect Saudi university students, especially given the many protective and precautionary procedures taken to control the COVID-19 pandemic and avert infections amongst students (Alghamdi, 2021). This finding tallies with the nature of Saudi students' families whereby elderly people are taken care of by their children and relatives, as one of

their religious responsibilities (Sibai & Yamout, 2020). On the other hand, missing the classroom social setting was one of the highest negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' online study throughout the curfew period (Alghamdi, 2021). This may suggest that addressing the missing social presence in online study for students through the available communication channels must be attended to by teachers/lecturers to maintain and enhance the lost spontaneous student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions. In addition, cognitive presence, which focuses on the ability of teachers to consider the preparedness of students to participate in the online study experience, and facilitatory presence through embodying direct instruction for the tools, resources and mentoring activities, are important to compensate for the missing social manifestation in online study (Rapanta et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study was aligned to the Social Impact Theory (SIT). From a SIT perspective, there is potential for change in the social and educational aspects of students' lives due to the impact of approved measures throughout the COVID-19 outbreak in Lesotho. According to Latane' (1981), social impact can be defined as any effect on feelings, intentions, conduct, or opinions of individuals arising from getting real, oblique, or imaginary existence or engagements of others. Taking this definition into account, SIT aims to explain the way in which impact is reciprocal by either a majority or a minority. Latane' (1981) supports SIT as a path for scrutinizing social impact as a consequence of forces working in a shared power field, signifying that impact by either a mainstream or a marginal will be as a cumulative role of the strength, imminence as well as the number of its causes (Latane' & Wolf, 1981). *Strength* designates the persistent authority from the social existence of impact causes, which vary in accordance with authorities and locations of one impact basis. The grander the power of the foundation, the larger the social power. *Immediacy* denotes the familiarity amid the basis sending material or captivating action and the beneficiaries of that data or accomplishment (Alghamdi, 2021). More instant sources deliver a larger social impact. Finally, the *number of sources* includes the number of sources that influence individually. The greater the quantity of foundations, the more the social power, consequently (Latane' 1981; Latane' & Wolf, 1981). The appeal of SIT arises from the pertinence of its framework, which can be applied in numerous settings and be additionally tested with precise scenarios. Consequently, SIT has been utilized in diverse research settings within different milieus. For example, it was used to study the impact of two social forces – social size and propinquity on the feelings of users and their self-presentation (Argo et al., 2005); secondly, the impact of users' number on the professed integrity of user-generated material on social media (Mir and Zaheer, 2012); thirdly, the impact of social effects on people's vaccination decision-making dynamics (Xia and Liu, 2013); and finally, the impact of association or persuader immediacy, message persuasion and perceived supportiveness on political outlook transformation (Chang et al., 2018). In terms of communication and social event studies, the SIT framework offers a valuable explanation of how individuals are prejudiced by their social milieu (Chang et al., 2018). At the same time, the SIT designates how powers that function in a social arena are tangled in events and how others are predisposed by these powers after some time (Lin et al, 2019). In the current study, SIT was applied to understand how university students' lives were influenced by the COVID-19 outbreak in Lesotho, in light of the precautionary and preventive measures taken in response to the pandemic.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are discussed under two broad themes: positive social experiences of tertiary students regarding COVID-19, and negative social experiences of tertiary students regarding COVID-19. Under each broad theme, there are sub-themes. As such, positive social experiences of tertiary students regarding COVID-19 constitute four sub-themes, while the other broad theme constitutes five sub-themes. As earlier highlighted, the Social Impact Theory guided the interpretation of the findings.

Social Experiences of Tertiary Students Regarding COVID-19

The social experiences of tertiary students regarding COVID-19 are discussed under positive and negative impacts. This study conceptualized positive experiences regarding COVID-19 as those experiences that are productive, valuable and uplift or improve the social wellbeing of an individual – in this case, university students. This study also conceptualized negative experiences regarding COVID-19 as those experiences that are not valuable and do not improve an individual's social wellbeing.

Positive Experiences of Tertiary Students

This section discusses four sub-themes on positive experiences regarding COVID-19, namely, appreciation of life, cohesion among family members, enhancement of social interaction in online education and culture of humour.

Appreciation of Life

Some of the participants acknowledged the fact that since the first COVID-19 death was reported in Lesotho, they consequently appreciated life more than before. Furthermore, participants cited that due to the multitude of deaths that largely occurred overseas, which they watched on television, they now take it upon themselves to ensure that community members always wear masks correctly. This finding reinforces the Social Impact Theory in that students link their positive experiences to the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding suggests that tertiary students are now more aware of the importance of personal and public lives. This is clearly illustrated by the following quotes:

Ever since coronavirus came to Africa, I started seeing that life is crucial and I must treasure it (Student 14, Male, Faculty of Education).

When I noticed that many people, young and old, were dying of COVID-19, I realized that life is precious, and I started wearing my mask properly (Student 23, Female, Faculty of Law).

From the quotes above, participants are linking the COVID-19 related deaths that occurred worldwide and this linkage awakens the importance of life in these students. This finding suggests that pandemics bring an awareness of how mortal human beings are on earth. The concept of appreciation of life is also exhibited in activities such as the insistence on the correct wearing of masks. This finding illustrates the need for COVID-19 awareness campaigns that focus on correct use of masks as a strategy of combating the pandemic. Massive loss of lives triggers fear in people, making them ponder upon the importance of life. Furthermore, the fact that multitudes of people died of COVID-19 worldwide created the impression that death was imminent. This was exacerbated by the fact that, during the first wave, testing positive to COVID-19 was perceived as a death sentence since there were no vaccines and very little was known about the COVID-19 virus then.

Improved Cohesion and Spirituality among Family Members

The study established that during the first COVID-19 induced lockdown, most family members got more united than before. Some of the participants affirmed that they learnt the value of tolerance and forgiveness during the lockdown period. The concept 'forgiveness' is linked to the previous findings, whereby people perceived death to be imminent; hence one feels bound to forgive as soon as possible. The following participants highlighted this finding, thus:

I noticed that during the lockdown, my family was more peaceful than any other time before the lockdown. We were all scared of death, so we were now having morning and evening devotion in the lounge every day. My father accepted Jesus as His saviour during the first lockdown (Student 15, Female, Faculty of Education).

My family was very much united during the lockdown since we were solving problems together. I liked that sort of unity brought by daily prayer sessions, conversations, the shared laughter and doing activities together as family members (Student 11, Male, Faculty of Social Sciences).

Since I joined this university, I have never spent as much time with my family... I have never seen my siblings more united than what happened during the lockdown, in early 2020. We were not quarrelling like we used to do (Student 19, Female, Faculty of Education).

Social cohesion within families was exhibited through solving problems together, fearing a common enemy (COVID-19) and not quarrelling. Thus, families were having more time to solve family problems collectively. In this case, the lockdown acted as a catalyst that strengthened family bonds. Even though COVID-19 brought with it social distancing in both private and public spaces, within some households it brought the much-needed closeness that had been missing before the COVID-19 pandemic. Family unity was realized through shared activities such as praying together, talking one-on-one daily, playing chess, cards, learning new hobbies, improvising activities to suit the COVID-19 lockdown protocols.

Enhancing Social Interaction in Online Education

Most of the students admitted that online learning made them reorganize their priorities in life, cancelling all things that consumed their time such as Facebook, so as to focus on schoolwork. In order to effectively manage online learning, most students said that they had to improve their interaction with other students. This is clarified below:

Ever since COVID-19 came, I found online learning very challenging for me. Hence, I had to look for friends to assist me, through explaining the notes from the lecturers and to write our tests together. As a result, I started to do better in my studies (Student 28, Male, Faculty of Humanities).

I never used to interact with other students before the coronavirus hit the community. I used to enjoy taking a drink alone and doing my schoolwork on my own. However, online lessons taught me how to work with other students on WhatsApp, to get announcements from lecturers, homework and notes, in order to do better in my studies (Student 14, Male, Faculty of Education).

From the quotes above, it is evident that social interaction was improved among students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who seemed to be anti-social before the advent of COVID-19, realized that they needed to change their lifestyles by adjusting to the dictates of online learning, where knowledge has to be shared online, for better comprehension. Given that online learning is challenging for most students, social interaction helps students to share learning materials, discuss class notes and write tests together. The issue of independence comes to the fore, whereby students are able to work more independently from teachers. This strengthens their ability to cope and manage their work. In a way, students are empowered. However, it can be argued that since some of the online assessments that are supposed to be individual assessments are actually conducted in groups rather than individually, the performance may not be a true reflection of individual performance for some of the students. The use of online assessment challenges has been highlighted before in distance learning programmes (Watson & Sottile, 2010; Wald, 2018), while Kearns (2020) indicated that this cheating became more pronounced during COVID-19.

Culture of Humour

Due to the high levels of stress associated with lockdown and COVID-19 in general, some of the students intimated that they had to resort to humour, in order to cope with life. This culture of humour was available on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp:

After having realized that some of the students were attempting suicide due to stress brought by COVID-19, most of us started posting different jokes on social media (Student 4, Male, Faculty of Agriculture).

Currently, I am one of the students who now posts a lot of jokes and funny anecdotes on Facebook. The aim is to make other students laugh so that we do not think about killing ourselves in these tough times (Student 8, Male, Faculty of Social Sciences).

There are some suicide incidents that were reported in the past months. Therefore, some students decided to change the situation by cracking jokes and sharing them on social media, to make life less strenuous (Student 13, Male, Faculty of Health Sciences).

Based on the foregoing quotes, the culture of humour was brought about by the unfortunate incidents happening at the university, such as suicide or suicide attempts. In this case, the culture of humour is a coping mechanism utilized by university students to cope with difficult situations. Since the culture of humour was prevalent on social media, it is a culture that does not heighten students' vulnerability to COVID-19, hence it was a harmless culture. Furthermore, the culture of humour is embedded in a feeling of societal destiny, unity and a sense of responsibility. This finding reinforces the Social Impact Theory in that students link their positive experiences to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following section looks at negative experiences of tertiary students regarding COVID-19.

Negative Experiences of Tertiary Students

This section discusses five sub-themes relating to negative experiences of tertiary students regarding COVID-19: a) academic work taken into the domestic sphere, b) domestic and gender-based violence, c) loss of social capital, d) stigma and social alienation, and e) reduced spirituality and hesitancy to be vaccinated.

Academic Work Taken into the Domestic Sphere

As mentioned earlier, participants reported that due to COVID-19, lessons had to be conducted online; hence, most students were learning from home. In this case, academic work was taken from the institution of learning to the domestic sphere. This posed a number of challenges to most students in terms of finances, quality of schoolwork, failure to balance schoolwork and domestic chores and being expected to prioritize traditional duties over schoolwork. Clarifying the situation, the following participants shared their experiences:

During the second wave of COVID-19, my husband tested positive to the pandemic. I was staying in Roma since I was conducting my research project using Roma as my research site. However, I was instructed to go back home to Butha-Buthe to look after my husband. My mother-in-law had told me that I was supposed to come home to fulfil my responsibilities first. My husband took very long to heal; so, I had to drop out of school last year. I resumed my studies this year (Student 2, Female, Faculty of Humanities).

Learning from home is very difficult for me because I have to do a lot of work to help my mother since she is a single mother. She runs a shop, hence I would be sent to run some errands for her, such as driving the car, going to buy stock, assist in stock-taking and keeping the books, since I am pursuing a degree in Accounts at NUL (Student 6, Female, Faculty of Social Sciences).

I struggle to learn from home because my sister died of COVID-19 and left a four-month-old baby. My mother is late and my grandmother is too old to take care of the baby, hence I am the one doing everything. I am not doing well in my assignments and tests currently (Student 12, Female, Faculty of Health Sciences).

The excerpts reveal that when academic work moves from the institution of learning into the domestic sphere, it negatively affects university students' academic performance. Students' social life negatively impacts the quality of learning and the outcome. While learning from home, there is no clear separation of academic work and domestic chores. For most students, house chores seem to consume more of their time than their schoolwork. When academic work is relocated to the domestic space, it becomes overwhelming for some students, with some of them dropping out of school, for instance when married female students are expected to take care of their sick husbands.

Domestic and Gender-based Violence

Some of the students reported that during the first lockdown, they experienced and witnessed domestic violence within their households, being perpetrated on females by males. Furthermore, they admitted that this behaviour affected them academically, since at times they could not submit assignments on time:

I suffered a lot during the first lockdown because I had gone to my husband's workplace in Mafeteng to collect my clothes, given that we were having marital problems. He was sexually abusing me every night, threatening me, and preventing me from leaving him. I could not do my assignments. I had to sneak to the police, who fortunately gave me a travelling permit to go back to Leribe, where my parents live (Student 17, Female Faculty of Humanities).

During both lockdowns, I was at home in Thaba-Tseka District. My father was always beating my mother, accusing her of cooking too little food. I could not concentrate on my studies and my performance started deteriorating since then. I could not afford the bus fare to Roma campus to consult counsellors (Student 7, Female Faculty of Humanities).

My young sister was raped in Maseru Town during the first lockdown, on her way from the pharmacy to buy her diabetes medication. No one rescued her because there were no people on the streets, since it was lockdown. That incident traumatized us as a family, and the rapist was not arrested because he was an unfamiliar person and he ran away. I find it difficult to focus on my studies; hence, I am failing most of my tests (Student 22, Male Faculty of Law).

The findings suggest that domestic and gender-based violence were prevalent during lockdown periods in Lesotho since these incidents occurred across three different districts. Domestic violence was occurring mostly in private spaces where people were forced to stay with their abusers. Travelling restrictions heightened women's vulnerability to domestic abuse and gender-based violence. The gender-based violence incident that occurred in Maseru District was due to deserted streets, hence the abuser capitalized on this factor. The beating of the woman by her husband for cooking too little food illustrates high stress levels associated with lockdown periods where people are confined within homes with insufficient food and lack of income. There was too much focus on the physical health effects of COVID-19, which blinded many from the mental effects. For example, Schwartz and colleagues (2021) found that students' stress levels were above the critical threshold level during the first and second waves of the pandemic.

Loss of Social Capital

Some of the participants cited the death of their parents and relatives from COVID-19 as one of the stumbling blocks to their academic work. Social capital in this case meant parents, wives, husbands, siblings and relatives. The death of such people signalled loss of social capital for the students, as highlighted below:

My father died of coronavirus during the second wave, early this year. I am now left with my physically challenged mother (Student 1, Male, Faculty of Law).

During the second wave of the pandemic, I lost both parents due to COVID-19. My mother contracted it from my father who was an international truck driver. I am now left alone with my siblings (Student 5, Female, Faculty of Social Sciences).

I lost my grandmother due to COVID-19. I am an orphan, so losing my grandmother left me with no other close relative (Student 10, Male, Faculty of Science and Technology).

The death of close family relatives meant loss of capital for some university students. For those students who lost breadwinners, it meant there would be no one to pay tuition fees for them. For those who were self-sponsored, the death of breadwinners meant there was no source of income and possibly this might lead to dropping out of the university. Hence, COVID-19 robbed students of their social capital, sources of income and in some cases opportunity to earn a university degree.

Stigma and Social Alienation

This study found out that there is a lot of stigma attached to the COVID-19 disease. Most of the students intimated that when their relatives tested positive to COVID-19, friends and neighbours shunned them. COVID-19 was also associated with alienation, triggered mostly by the lockdown and stigma, hence, the fear of being stigmatized by friends, lecturers and family members. These findings are clarified by the following submissions:

When my mother tested positive to COVID-19, no one wanted to greet me and my family members. I felt isolated. It emotionally affected me and I had no one to turn to (Student 16, Female, Faculty of Science and Technology).

When my brother who was working in South Africa came home during the December 2020 holidays, he tested positive to COVID-19 and was admitted in hospital. After he was discharged, he came home and the community was angry that he brought COVID-19 from South Africa. The community avoided our family (Student 26, Female, Faculty of Social Sciences).

When my mother and sister got sick due to COVID-19, my family was avoided by most of the community members; including some of our close relatives who did not come to support us. They claimed that they were afraid of contracting COVID-19. I had to hide this from my classmates, for fear of being stigmatized, yet again (Student 24, Female, Faculty of Education).

The data above suggest that the stigma attached to COVID-19 is triggered by fear of contracting COVID-19. This suggests that awareness campaigns ought to address issues around how COVID-19 is contracted and how one should take protection measures. For instance, people need to be educated that greeting someone while maintaining the required social distance is not risky. Due to stigma, some relatives feel disempowered and constrained to assist their relatives who test positive to COVID-19; hence, they shun them. Moreover, it can also be argued that, for some people, COVID-19 brought with it a reinforcement of selfishness. This finding also buttresses the Social Impact Theory in that students link their negative experiences to the COVID-19 pandemic. To the victims of stigma, it resulted in aloofness, shame and depression.

Reduced Spirituality and Hesitancy to be Vaccinated

For some students, COVID-19 affected their spirituality negatively in the sense that they began to doubt the existence of God. Failure to get answers from their religious leaders on the origins of COVID-19, not getting answers on why coronavirus came to the world and why multitudes of people were dying worldwide, put their faith to the test. The following excerpts illustrate this finding thus:

I am now doubting the existence of God because how can God allow many people to die like this? Is it the end of the world? The COVID-19 vaccine is said to be unsafe for humans and is being given free yet the COVID-19 tests are very expensive. I asked my pastor all these questions and I did not get satisfactory answers. I have now stopped going to church (Student 20, Female, Faculty of Law).

When my relatives died of COVID-19 in February this year, I began to think negatively about Christianity. How can we die of a man-made disease like this? Why didn't God stop all this in China long back? No one is giving any convincing religious explanation to this pandemic that has and is still killing people every day. Now we are asked to take the vaccine to protect

ourselves from something whose origin people are failing to explain. Therefore, I fear to take the vaccine (Student 25, Male, Faculty of Health Sciences).

My pastor used to say he could cure anything, so why can't he cure COVID-19 patients now? Before my mother died, I took her to our pastor but the pastor did not even touch my mother, saying he was afraid of contracting the virus. So, I have stopped going to his church now. I am also hesitant to take the COVID-19 vaccine due to the mystery surrounding this pandemic. My pastor told us not to take the vaccine, saying it is the devil's plan to cause chaos. I also do think it is the devil's plan to kill all the people on earth (Student 27, Female, Faculty of Social Sciences).

These quotes demonstrate that when the impact of a pandemic is high, it affects people's spirituality. Based on these findings, lack of capacity to contain the virus is perceived as God's failure or worse still, it illustrates God's inexistence. Some students even doubted the powers pastors wield, since some pastors used to claim that they can heal all sorts of diseases, but they are currently failing to heal COVID-19 patients. Kafka (2020) highlighted similar impacts of fear and shock brought about by the pandemic. Life suddenly seemed uncertain for students. Low spirituality is also linked to hesitation to take the vaccine, where some participants claimed that lack of religious explanation made them doubt the vaccines. This uncertainty is also linked to the fact that COVID-19 vaccines are available for free yet COVID-19 testing is very expensive, hence some participants perceived the free vaccines as a ploy to wipe the earth of humanity, which was also perceived as the devil's plan.

With regard to pastors who discourage congregants to take vaccines, this study is of the opinion that such pastors' behaviour is retrogressive and they should be made to account for their actions. Overall, the controversies regarding the origins of COVID-19 are causing low spirituality among believers and hesitation to get vaccinated among university students.

Conclusion

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic is generally associated with negative outcomes such as sickness, loss of jobs and death, there are also positive outcomes. The death of multitudes of people due to COVID-19 increased the spirituality of some students who found themselves valuing life and being prayerful more than before. The lockdown brought by COVID-19 was fruitful to some families who found themselves bonding through shared spaces, problem solving and doing activities together such as praying and engaging in same hobbies. Social interaction was enhanced due to challenges encountered during online learning; hence, some students realized that they ought to work as a team for them to do well in college. However, for some university students, COVID-19 brought about a myriad of negative consequences, including some life-changing ones.

Some students lost their parents and relatives due to COVID-19. The death of breadwinners and close family members led to loss of social capital. The shift from face-to-face teaching to online classes is not a positive adjustment for students, especially married female students. Some married students had to balance schoolwork and family responsibilities such as taking care of the sick, which is a huge burden to them.

Relocation of schoolwork to the domestic domain proved to be overwhelming for students even to single students who had to balance schoolwork and domestic chores. Domestic violence and gender-based violence were induced during the lockdown and this negatively

affected the students academically.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following four recommendations are made:

- i) The Government of Lesotho ought to roll out vigorous COVID-19 awareness campaigns. The campaigns should not only focus on preventive measures, but should also address issues around stigma and shed more light on COVID-19 vaccines so that people can make informed choices;
- ii) There ought to be toll-free telephone lines available to students to enable free access to counselling services since some students cannot contact university counselling services due to lack of money;
- iii) Religious leaders ought to avoid meddling into scientific matters such as vaccines since they admit that they do not have any religious/spiritual solution to the problem; and
- iv) More empirical evidence is required regarding the doubt that people cast on COVID-19 vaccines; hence, future studies may focus on contributing factors to vaccine hesitancy as well as the economic impact of COVID-19.

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