Title

The psychological impact of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on university students in Mutare District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The current corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has caused widespread fear of falling sick, dying, hopelessness, stigma and discrimination. The purpose of the research study was to explore the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students in Mutare District of Zimbabwe. To explore the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students, the researchers sought to gain insight on how students make sense of the pandemic in relation to their education. Research participants were selected through purposive sampling technique so as to obtain information from participants on the basis of their experience. 20 students took part in the research. Data for the study was collected using semi-structured interview guide to ensure administration consistency and allowed for researchers' probing of original response. Thematic data analysis method was used to explore the meanings and experiences drawn upon in the participants' views. The psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students from this study was experienced in form of stress, acute trauma, fear, apathy, anxiety and depression. In reducing the psychological impact of COVID-19, participants perceived: adhering to COVID-19 prevention and control regulations, university subsidizing Wi-Fi, awareness campaigns, counselling and psychosocial support as viable measures. The findings imply the need for creation of health and safety committee which will monitor adherence to Covid-19 protocols and administration of E-counselling services which allow university students to cope and thrive in education during the COVID-19 crisis.

Key words

corona virus disease (COVID-19), Mutare district, psychological impact, university students, Zimbabwe

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Introduction

The study sought to explore the psychological impact of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on university students in Mutare district of Zimbabwean. Through a qualitative approach which aimed to provide detailed examination of students lived experiences, the study sought to understand how they were psychologically affected by COVID-19. Since there is limited research data on the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students in Zimbabwe, it was therefore, important to find out how university students in Zimbabwe have also been affected psychologically by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions on city-to-city movement, depletion of financial resources, limited access to learning resources, continued disruption of the academic calendar and increased student anxiety and uncertainty has prompted the exploration of the psychological impact of COVID-19 to university students in Zimbabwe. Such a study was aimed at exploring the psychological impact of an unforeseen emergency on students, as well as articulating effective interventions and strategies to mitigate the psychological effects of a pandemic on people at large. The study also aimed at addressing the psychological problems experienced by university students in Zimbabwe. The paper discusses the background, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion on the current research study.

Background of the study

The rationale of this study was to explore the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students in Mutare District, Zimbabwe using the Afrocentric theory lens which projects people's critical insight about phenomena from their own center and approaches knowledge holistically through emphasis or uniqueness, interconnectedness, and empowerment of the African people (Karenga, 1995). The corona virus disease (COVID-19) is currently in the third wave. An Asian country, India is said to have been experiencing more new cases and more deaths in this current third wave of COVID-19. African countries may end up being affected as well. If such a scenario occurs then university students in Zimbabwe, having been previously exposed to two lockdowns since the pandemic started will be affected again. The researchers used the Afrocentric theory as an alternative to western based theory instead of western ideas, values, knowledge and approaches due to the fact that African problems are better understood from African context so as to come up with effective solutions or interventions.

The Afrocentric theory assumes that black people view themselves as centered and central to their own situation when there are agents, actors and participants of their lived experience which relates well to Zimbabwean university students. The Afrocentric conceptual idea has the intellectual capacity to positively redefine and transform the distorted image of the African people and also provide solutions to their problems (Kamah-Abiwu, 2016). Moreover, the Afrocentric theory places African people in the center of an analysis of an African phenomenon, therefore the Afrocentric idea serves as a framework with reference where a phenomenon is viewed and understood in the lives of African people (Asante, 1991). In this research study, the university students were the center of analysis of the psychological impact of COVID 19 in an African scenario.

According to Asante (2003), Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interest, values, and perspectives predominate. In addition, Chawane (2016) argues that as an ideology and theory, Afrocentricity should be employed to achieve its objective of attaining change and placing African people in the center of the phenomena understudy (Perrelin, 2012). Therefore, the Afrocentric theory was considered best in exploring the psychological impact of covid 19 on university students in Mutare district of Zimbabwe which is an African setting.

Disease itself accompanied by forced quarantine to combat COVID-19 applied by nationwide lockdowns can produce acute panic, anxiety, obsessive behaviors, hoarding, paranoia, and depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the long run (Dubey et al., 2020). The above information ascertains the need for further investigations to establish the situation of the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students. To the knowledge of the authors, there is no research which has been conducted in the study area and this one is the first to be conducted on the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students in Mutare district, Zimbabwe. Hence, to understand the psychological impact of covid 19 on university students through Afrocentric perspective lens, the current study objectives were able to be achieved.

The United Nation's Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020) stated that the pandemic has interrupted the learning of more than one billion students in 129 countries around the world (UNESCO, 2020). Many universities worldwide have moved to emergency remote teaching (ERT) via online platforms, further inducing anxiety among the students. Studies on the effect of COVID-19 and lockdowns on college students in China reported significant adverse effects on the students' psychological well-being and high levels of anxiety (Cao et al., 2020). To date, several studies have been conducted on the effects

of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns from the public health perspective. Most of the research has been conducted in China and Western countries, mainly among the general population, healthcare workers, and students. No studies on the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students have been conducted in Zimbabwe yet.

It is the hope of the researchers that the findings of this study could assist universities in Zimbabwe and Africa in forming a theoretical basis for identifying evidence based psychological interventions to assist students during this current COVID 19 pandemic and future similar adversities.

Given the unforeseen circumstances, it seemed vital to explore the psychological experiences of university students in the Zimbabwean scenario, during this COVID-19 pandemic. Such a study is anticipated to explore the psychological impact of an unforeseen emergency on students, as well as to articulate and come up with effective interventions and strategies to mitigate the psychological effects of a pandemic on people at large. This study was designed to address the psychological problems experienced by university students in Zimbabwe.

The general objective of this study was to explore the psychological impact of covid 19 on university students in Mutare District in Zimbabwe. The specific objectives of the study were:

- To determine the university student's understanding of COVID 19.
- To ascertain what the university students consider as the effects of COVID 19.
- To investigate the perceived psychological effects of COVID 19.
- To establish what the university students perceive to be appropriate mitigation strategies for the psychological effects of COVID 19

Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled institutions of higher learning to adopt the online teaching and learning mode of education (Ayle, Mekoren & Mekuria 2020). However, Kaiita, Nomngcoyiya and Kangethe (2020), indicate that not all university students have access to online teaching and learning. For instance, rural based students in South Africa experience irregular access to online lectures due in unavailability and affordability of internet due to poor or weak connectivity. On the contrary, urban based students have no challenges with network connectivity. In explaining these challenges faced by rural based students and students from poor households, Kaiita,

Nomngcoyiya and Kangethe (2020), further state that unavailability affordability of electricity weakened and hindered the ability of these students from accessing online documents. However, both students and staff could not afford internet data cost regardless of their social standing.

In their study of the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students in Ethopia, Aylie, Mekonen and Mekuria (2020) shared that 21.3% university students showed depression, anxiety and stress due to lack of social support from their peers. University students who had strong social support were less likely to develop depression compared to those who had low social support. Furthermore, students from low-income families or those whose relatives got corona virus had a higher risk of developing anxiety compared to high income families and those whose relatives had not contracted corona. Kaiita, Nomngcoyiya and Kangethe (2020) stated that on migration to online teaching and learning, students and lecturers developed negative attitudes and expressed a sense of fear on transition. Students in some universities in South Africa indicated that their inability to access online lectures caused frustration and anguish which resulted in perceptions of a worthless future (Tanga, Ndhlovu & Tanga, 2020). Some students were not able to stay motivated and focused during COVID-19 because of lack of physical support from peers. (Ojo et al, 2021).

To mitigate the challenges faced by students, some universities in South Africa provided internet data to students and lecturers to meet the high cost of internet services (Kaiita et al, 2020). Furthermore, some universities in South Africa developed a long-term strategy of and provision of online mental health services as an integral intervention strategy (Ojo et al. 2021). A study carried out in Rwanda found that universities had responded to COVID-19 with a mix of innovation, resilience and support by creating appropriate learning models and empathetic and impactful solutions to thrive during COVID-19 (Faraj, 2020). The study further recommended psychosocial support for students faced with challenges triggered by COVID-19.

Methodology

The qualitative approach was used to explore the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students. It is through qualitative research that analyses of experiences and attach meaning to situation or event evidenced by actions, behaviour, thoughts, feelings and beliefs is made possible. An interpretive phenomenological approach was adopted as it recognises the central role of the analyst in understanding the experiences of the participant. The approach was phenomenological in

that it was concerned with individual subjective reports rather that formulation of objective accounts. This method proved to be useful as the research is subjective in the sense that it seeks to explore the psychological impact on students. The research design provided a procedure involving studying 20 participants through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning.

Participants and setting

Participants were purposively sampled to elicit the most appropriate information in line with the nature of the study. The study participants comprised of 20 students of which 11were males and 9 females, aged between 20 years and 22 years who are studying for a first a Degree at Manicaland State University of Applied Sciences. The students who participated in the study were at different levels.

Instruments

Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview guide to ensure administration consistency and allow for researchers probing of original responses (Harell & Bradley, 2009; Tichapondwa, 2013). Interview length varied from 15 to 20 minutes. The semi-interview guide was divided into two parts with the first section answering the demographic profile of the participants. The second section addressing questions that are linked with the objective of the study. Semi structured interview guide gives participants freedom to express their views in their own terms and encourages two-way communication. Interview data was audio recorded for later translation and analysis. The audios are available and kept by the principal author.

Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the Manicaland State University of Applied Sciences Research Committee and the ethical clearance number is RBC/2020/01. The researchers obtained written consent from the participants. Prior to participant participation, information was provided which explained in detail the research purpose, procedures, risks and benefits including the rights of the participant and contact information of the researchers. The interviews were scheduled in such a manner that participants were ready to talk to the researchers. Provision was made that if participant could not go ahead with the interview as scheduled to notify the researcher in time. The researchers made use of anonymous names and kept recorded data on the Universal Storage Bus (USB) flash not accessible to people who might misuse it in order to adhere to the ethical principle of confidentiality. The USB data storage device is kept by the principal author. In line with the principle of voluntary participation participants were made aware that their participation in the study was voluntary and this evidenced by the signing consent forms. The participants were also made to understand verbally that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without fear of facing any unfavourable consequences.

Data analysis

Thematic data analysis technique was used. Thematic analysis allowed the researchers to precisely determine the relationships between concepts and compare them with the replicated data and by using, thematic analysis there is the possibility to link the various concepts and opinions of the participants, and all possibilities for interpretation are possible (Alhojailan, 2012). Thematic analysis provided the researchers with the opportunity to code and categorise data into themes, considering how issues influence the perceptions of participants. Firstly, familiarization with the data this initial phase involved re-reading the data and noting down initial ideas. This was followed by generating the initially codes b coding interesting features of the data across the entire data set. Sorting and collating all potentially relevant coded data extracts into themes was done, coded data extracts for each sub theme was reviewed to determine appearance in coherence pattern. For example, soft themes which did not have enough data to support were discarded whilst broad themes were broken down further. Refining of themes was achieved through detailed analysis, identifying story told by each theme whilst considering how the fitted into the entire story of the entire data set in relation to the research questions. Analysis of data used the following themes, nature of COVID-19, effects of COVID-19, the psychological impact of COVID-19 and ways

Results

The research findings were analysed under the following themes, nature of COVID-19, effects of COVID-19, the psychological impact of COVID-19 and ways to reduce the psychological effects of COVID-19.

Nature of COVID 19

Participants were aware of what COVID-19 is a fatal contagious disease. They also indicated that some of the characteristics of COVID-19 including form of transmission, symptoms, origins and that it is a global pandemic. These views are illustrated by responses such as the one below:

COVID-19 is a very serious disease that is transmitted through contact, therefore a lot of preventive measures should be exercised. It is characterised by difficulty in   breathing and

sore throat. I t affects the lungs and also leads to death (Participant 4).

It is evident that the students comprehend the nature and gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus is highly transmissible and spread such as by inhaling the air contaminated by an infected person, contact with the infected person and with objects and surface on which the virus has landed from an infected person (Pavari, 2020). Also, the virus spread to all continents causing huge economic, social distress and loss of life.

Effects of COVID-19

Participants also highlighted effects of COVID-19 in form of factors such as gender-based violence, disruption in education process, loss of source of income for families which resulted in strained financial resources hindering some students from accessing online education. Participants were also concerned about remaining at same level of education due to disruptions caused by COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Prostitution and criminal activities were also cited by participants as resulting from poverty. The following responses from participants substantiate these remarks:

COVID-19 has led to suspension of face to face lectures in all the universities in the country. Further, when on campus, discussion among students is difficult to engage in due to social distancing. Further, when on campus, discussions among students is difficult to engage in due to social distancing. Generally, relaxation mode and also burden of domestic chores, failure to study especially in orphan led homes is prevalent. We are used to engaging in discussion teams sitting close to each other. Some of our peers are now involved in prostitution and criminal activities because of financial instability and lack of resources in homes (Participant 1).

These research findings concur with a research carried out in Malaysia which found that the main stressors include financial constraints, remote online teaching and uncertainty about the future with regard to academics and career. Stressors are predominantly financial constraints, remote online learning, and uncertainty related to their academic performance, and future career prospects (Sundarasen et al., 2020). COVID-19 has had adverse effects on many student's social and educational lives. This has affected most student's mental states. It was also noted that the pandemic has interrupted the learning of more than one billion students in 129 countries around the world (UNESCO, 2020).

Psychological impact of COVID-19

Psychological attributes such as stress, anxiety, fear, acute trauma, apathy, depression were mentioned by participants as the most common psychological effects of COVID-19. These experiences are captured in the statements below:

Anxiety and fear of not completing your degree course, we worry whether we will go on work-related learning. Students fear infection because we come and converge at campus from different homes and that the health system in our country does not have the capacity to handle this illness so everyone is at risk. Learning from home has led to emotional torture and stress because of domestic violence in the home resulting in loss of concentration on studying. COVID-19 has led to loss of employment resulting in tension in our homes as a result of learning from home. Stigmatization also occurs when others suspect that you suffered from COVID-19 or a family member suffered from it (Participant 19).

The above findings are in similar to those from a research carried in Ethiopia which found that the prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among graduating class students was 22.2%, 39.6%, and 40.2% respectively (Mekonen et al, 2021). From the participants' responses it is evident that psychological effects of COVID-19 on university students were mostly stress, acute trauma, fear, apathy, anxiety and depression.

Ways to reduce psychological effects

Participants indicated that mindfulness would reduce the psychological effects of COVID-19. Adhering to COVID-19 prevention and control regulations was also a way to reduce the psychological effects. The participants were also of the opinion that the university may help my subsidizing Wi-Fi for students so that they may access learning online. Awareness campaigns, counselling and psychosocial support would reduce the psychological impact of COVID-19. Revamping the transport system and maintaining good hygiene would ensure student safety. The university could also revamp tutorials and timetable online services. These sentiments are validated by the following transactions from participants:

What is important is that a student should strive to adapt and accept the situation, students should welcome moving with the global trends and accept on-line learning as a norm. Having a positive attitude towards online learning would ease a lot of pressure on students. Institutions should also have adequate online facilities such as subsidies of Wi-Fi services. Further they should have a clear

understanding of the challenges which students are faced with. Measures such as donating Wi-Fi accessories to underprivileged students and giving fairly reasonable deadlines for submission of work online would go a long way in alleviating the psychological effects on students (Participant 7).

Bringing awareness to students about what is because some students are even afraid of coming to school due to fear of contracting the virus. Mental health awareness is essential to reduce stigma. Counselling and psychosocial-support would help. The institution needs to revamp transport system for students to feel safe to come to campus. I would like to commend the institution for taking steps towards maintenance of good hygiene. Students needs psychosocial support and assurance of safety at campus (Participant 10).

It is evident therefore, that the most common ways of reducing psychological impact of COVID- 19 perceived by the students were: adhering to COVID-19 prevention and control regulations, university subsidizing Wi-Fi, awareness campaigns, counselling and psychosocial support.

Discussion

COVID 19 conceptualisation

The current research study's findings reveal that participants recognised COVID 19 as a unique lie threatening disease whose mode of transmission is mainly through contact and has impacted upon the whole world including the university students' lives. Such findings compliment reviewed literature which states that COVID-19 is a contagious zoonotic disease caused by a novel coronavirus, named the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 whose spread to various parts of the world has been in an asynchronous pattern, most likely due to multiple contagion sources (Murewanhema et al., 2020). However, interesting to note are some sentiments expressed on the origins of the COVID 19 virus from reviewed literature as evidenced by the view that others have labelled the virus as a biological welfare between super powers while others have even associated it with the economic sabotage which fail in aim to isolate China (Pavari, 2020).

University students' learning

University students were affected in their learning process as evidenced by the current research findings. Participants mentioned inability to attend online learning due to family strained financial resources. This is complimentary to literature which states that with many resource-constrained African countries struggling with limited infrastructure that cannot accommodate all prospective higher education students (Lwoga, 2012). Furthermore, the obvious and immediate challenge we faced was student connectivity as many of our students, even those in urban centers, struggled with data access in order for them to fully participate in their online learning (Faraj, 2020). Also, the pandemic has affected students' rights to quality, safe and inclusive education and social engagement with peers and educators (Mukute et al., 2020). Therefore, the need to address the challenges associated with university students' learning during the COVID 19 era since failure to address the various challenges facing e-learning could ultimately lead to increased failure of e-learning initiatives (Kaisara & Bwalya, 2021).

Psychological problems experienced by university students

The university students indicated to have experienced psychological problems such as stress, depression, fear, emotional disturbances and apathy. These psychological effects have been confirmed by past studies conducted on the component. For instance, Islam et al. (2020) note that students were experiencing heightened depression and anxiety. From their study, around 15% of the students reportedly had moderately severe depression, whereas 18.1% were severely suffering from anxiety. These psychological problems were caused by various factors such as frustration and boredom, implementation of social lockdown with classmates, friends, and teachers, lack of personal space at home, and family financial loss due to lockdown (Salmana et al., 2020).

Impact of psychological problems caused by COVID 19 on university students

Psychological effects of COVID-19 in form of depression, anxiety, stress, fear impacts negatively on university students' academic performance. This finding concurs with a study by Mekonen et al. (2021), which revealed that 22.2%, 39.6%, and 40.2% of the respondents experienced stress, anxiety, and depression respectively in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, Boston university (2020) notes that a higher proportion of students reported that their mental health negatively impacted their academic performance.

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have also caused reduced motivation towards studies university students' motivation due to increased pressures to learn independently, abandonment of daily future routines, and potentially higher rates of dropout as direct consequences of these measures (Grubic et al., 2020). Thus, increasing the conditions of heightened levels of psychological distress.

Students indicated that a threat to basic needs carries negatively affects our mental health students' feelings of economic uncertainty may be the larger threat campuses may try to adjust by ensuring continued student and other career services. Similarly, Tanga et al (2020) suggested that the inability for students to access to online lessons resulted in frustration, anguish and perceptions of a worthless future.

Lessing the psychological impact of COVID 19 on university students

Awareness campaigns, counselling and psychosocial support were suggested as means of reducing the psychological effects of COVID-19. Similarly, a study in Rwanda suggested that universities need to provide psychosocial support to students during COVID-19. It is better to develop effective strategies and interventions, train students about self-protection, and establish a psychological crisis intervention team to minimize the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mokenen et al, 2021). It is crucial to be constantly in touch with the students and essential for universities to embark on designed programmes which aim to reduce anxiety, such as life skills training and mindfulness therapy, which have been validated to reduce anxiety levels (Sundarasen, 2020). In addition, from reviewed literature it was established that the large number of respondents experiencing course interruptions highlighted the serious need for greater investment in online learning and academic institutions should follow suit in ensuring that the majority of their coursework can be completed online (Mugo et al., 2020).

Limitations of the study include the use of a qualitative approach due to time constrains instead of combining it with quantitative approach which would have an advantage. The study did not incorporate objective measurements that may be prone to reporting bias since it was based on subjective responses.

Conclusions

The research study established that: the psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on university students were mostly anxiety, depression, fear, stress, apathy and acute trauma. Participants were aware of what COVID-19 is a fatal contagious disease. They also indicated that some of the characteristics of COVID-19 including form of transmission, symptoms, origins and that it is a global pandemic. From their responses, it is evident that the students comprehend the nature and gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants also highlighted other effects of COVID-19 as

manifesting in form of factors such as gender-based violence, disruption in education process, and loss of source of income for families which resulted in strained financial resources hindering some students from accessing online education. Students also worried about remaining at same level of education due to disruptions caused by COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. In addition, the research study revealed that prostitution and criminal activities were also resulted from poverty due to lockdown restrictions which affected economic status of many students and their families. Ways of curbing the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students revealed by the current research study include adhering to COVID-19 prevention and control regulations, university subsidizing Wi-Fi, awareness campaigns, counselling and psychosocial support.

Recommendations

From the above findings on the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students, the authors recommend the following:

- More scientific research should be carried out to establish the efficacy of online teaching and learning in African countries since it is now the most preferred method of the teaching and learning process in universities during this current COVID-19 pandemic and universities to re-examine their curricula, learning outcomes, and assessment methods for the courses and programs taught online as they should be distinguished from those meant for face-to-face teaching mode

- Universities should intensify psychological services since students are facing various challenges due to COVID-19 which in turn impact negatively on their psychological wellbeing either face to face or remotely, as they will mitigate the emotional and mental impacts on students

- There is need for a multisectoral approach by stakeholders to curb the psychological impact of COVID-19 on university students

- The third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic currently seriously affecting Asian countries such as India might have a bearing on third world countries. Therefore, universities should set priorities in developing digital psychological interventions, such as apps and online programs, alongside other services such as text messages, chatlines, forums, and

phone calls and awareness of the presence of such interventions should be clearly communicated to the student population.

Conclusion

The extent of the psychological impact from the present study and the literature review evolved around the students' mental health in form of anxiety, depression, fear, stress, apathy and acute trauma negatively impacting their academic performance and their high concern about how long the pandemic will last. These were also attributed to by factors such as financial problems due to loss of source of income for many parents who in turn failed to adequately provide for their university student dependents including failure to obtain data for on-line learning. Therefore, it is critical therefore, for institutions to create holistic supportive safety nets that not only focus on their mental health but also measures that curb economic uncertainty and their needs such as safety and security.

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