



THE IMPACT OF ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCE ON THE PERCEIVED EMOTIONAL CHANGES OF STUDENTS AT THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SRI JAYEWARDENEPURA

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This is a study which examines the impact of online learning experiences on the perceived emotional changes of students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the affective factors of online education that may cause emotional changes in students and to analyze strategies that could mitigate existing and future challenges. This Quantitative study is based on a cross-sectional survey design and collected quantitative data from 181 undergraduates from 16 departments of the faculty utilizing a structured online questionnaire. The results were analyzed to understand students' attitudes toward online learning, identify new emotional tendencies, and examine the potential problems of online learning concerning their impact on student's mental health based on the mode descriptive statistical analysis. According to the findings, this is the first online education experience of most undergraduates. 156 (86.2%) out of 181 students confirmed that while 25 (13.8%) have experienced it before. 156 out of 181 respondents (86.2%) experienced emotional shifts during the online learning period. Additionally, 116 respondents (64.1%) reported noticing emotional changes that they experienced for the first-time including feelings of deep isolation, intense stress, fear of academic setbacks, decreased motivation, anger and violation, and addiction to the internet and drugs. Critically, 36 respondents (19.6%) reported suicidal ideation and other adverse emotional changes. Based on these findings, this study recommends strong collaboration between the government and universities to address these issues. This collaboration should focus on implementing public health emergency programs, promoting social interaction, enhancing resource and institutional support, and providing guidance for future research.

Keywords: Covid-19, Online learning, Distance Education, Mental Health, Emotional Changes

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound global impact on educational systems and human lives, leading to the near-complete closure of schools, universities, and colleges. As of March 23, 2021, approximately 1.38 billion students were affected by school closures in response to the pandemic (IAU, 2020). UNICEF reported that 40 countries implemented localized closures, impacting around 47 percent of the global student population (UNICEF, 2021). The pandemic also caused widespread concern, with many universities worldwide postponing or cancelling all campus events, including lectures, conferences, athletic competitions, and other activities. Universities in Sri Lanka had been declared to close on March 14, 2020 (UGC, 2021). Because of the temporary closing of educational facilities, the global education environment has shifted dramatically in favour of distance learning with concern for the safety of students and staff members.

Distance learning, also known as distance education, e-learning, and online learning, is a type of education in which teachers and students are physically separated during instruction and various technologies are used to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication (Zincite, 2020). Various software technologies and applications, such as digital learning management systems, collaboration platforms for live-video communication, vast open online courses, and resources for creating learning content, saw an increase in use during this emergency change (IAU, 2020). However, most academics and administrative staff at Sri Lankan universities were unfamiliar with this type of online education. Face-to-face teaching and learning have been practiced in Sri Lankan universities for a long time. As a result, breaking this tradition and carrying out educational activities in an innovative online environment is regarded as difficult (Gunawardena, 2020).

As a result of these difficulties, students faced several burdens. Previous studies indicate that many students experienced dramatic emotional changes during this period, leading to mental health problems. However, in Sri Lanka, this aspect of online education has been overlooked by authorities and responsible parties. Recognizing this gap, the present study was initiated to examine the impact of online learning experiences on the perceived emotional changes of students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. The primary objective was to investigate the affective factors of online education that may cause emotional changes in students and to analyse strategies to mitigate existing and future challenges. Additionally, the study aimed to investigate students' attitudes toward online learning and identify new emotional tendencies that have emerged. This study employed a mixed methods approach to analyse data, provide insights into the hidden side of online education and propose applicable solutions to address these issues.

METHODOLOGY

Since the main objective of this study is to investigate the affective factors of online education that may cause emotional changes in students and identify the specific emotional changes students experience, this quantitative study employed a cross-sectional survey design to collect quantitative data from a representative sample of students. The study population comprised first and final-year students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, totalling 1,813 individuals (923 – First Year, 890 – Final Year). Given the impracticality of studying the entire population, a sample of 181 (92 – First year, 89 – Final year) was created using a simple random sampling method. Data were



collected through a structured questionnaire due to travel restrictions and quarantine rules. Contextual information was sourced from authentic websites, research articles, and official reports. Mode descriptive statistical method was utilized to analyse the quantitative data collected from the respondents using Excel, SPSS, and GIS software as the analytical tools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the following figure (1), the results of the study illustrate that this is the first online education experience of most undergraduates of the faculty. One hundred and fifty-six (86.2%) out of 181 confirmed that they are experiencing online education for the first time in their life, while 25 (13.8%) have experienced it before.

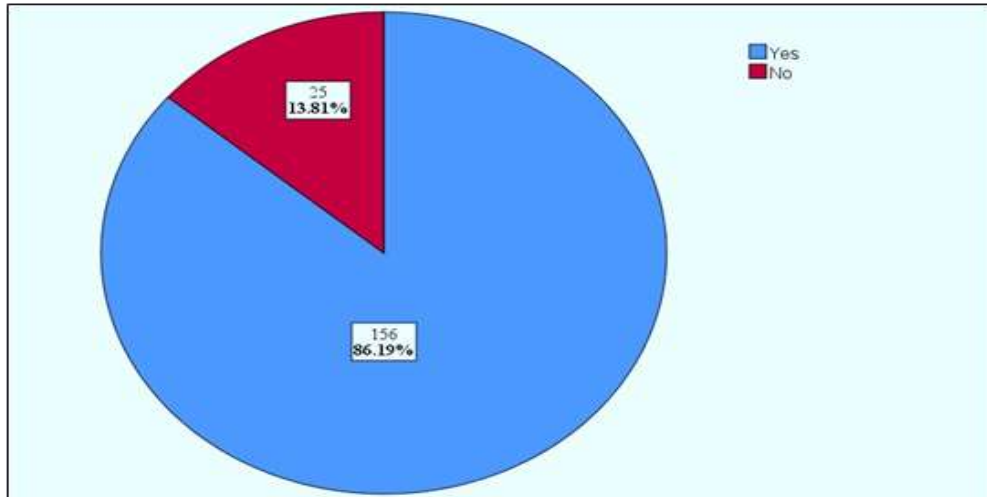


Figure 1. The nature of student’s experience in Online Learning.

The following Figure (2) illustrates that the majority of respondents 156 (86.19 %) confirmed that online education is more emotionally unpleasant than classroom education. Only 25 (13.81 %) of respondents said that online education has not made any emotional impact on them. However, a considerable percentage of the sample (86.19%) have experienced a great deal of emotional distress during their education. This figure should not be underestimated, as the majority of the faculty's students stated that they were in emotional turmoil during their studies.

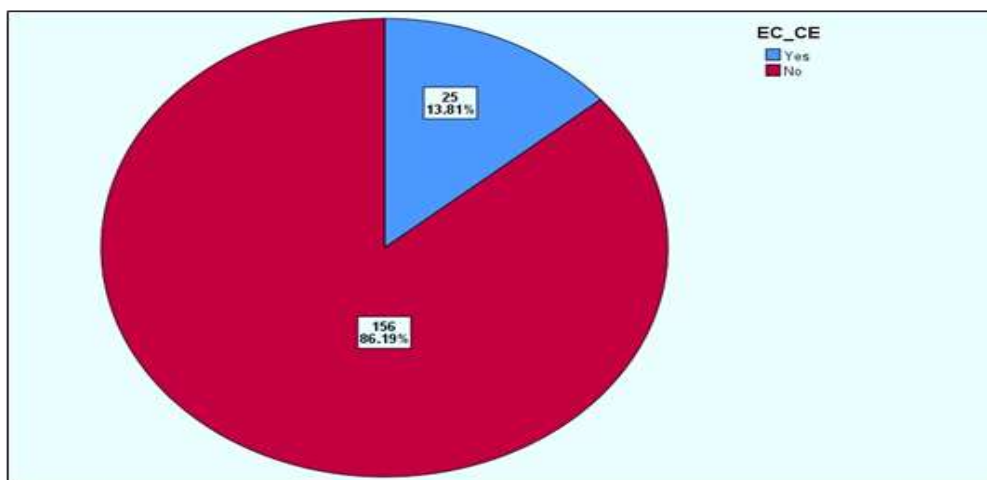


Figure 2. The nature of emotional comfortability in Online learning

With reference to the affective factors of online education, the following Table (1) illustrates that 110 (69.6%) female respondents stated that studying in front of a screen is more



emotionally stressful than learning with other resources, and 48 (30.4%) male respondents agreed. Fifteen female respondents (65.2%) and 8 male respondents (34.8%) disagree that learning in front of a screen makes them feel uncomfortable. Overall, 158 (87.3 percent) of the 181 respondents think that learning in front of a screen is more emotionally challenging than learning with other materials. Only 23 (12.7 %) of respondents agreed they were fine with it. As a result, findings confirmed the hypothesis that learning in front of a screen causes most students to feel emotionally uncomfortable while learning. As a result, screen-based learning might be considered a possible online learning problem that has a detrimental impact on students' mental health.

Secondly, 109 (71.7 %) female respondents and 43 (28.3 %) male respondents agreed that learning at home instead of the classroom makes them emotionally unhappy while learning. However, 16 (55.2%) female respondents and 13 (44.8%) male respondents are happier to learn at home than classroom learning. A total of 152 (84%); most respondents confirm that learning at home makes them more emotionally uncomfortable than classroom education. A minority, 29 (16%), agree to learning at home, and they are fine with it. However, the majority, 152 (84%), prove the argument that learning at home is a cause for the emotional changes of many students. Therefore, it is confirmed that the element of working at home is a potential problem in online education, which has the potential to make emotional changes in students.

On the question of whether online education's learning/teaching techniques have an impact on students' mental health, 115 (70.1%) female respondents and 49 (29.9%) male respondents agree that certain learning/teaching methods make them emotionally uncomfortable. Ten (10) female respondents (58.8%) and seven male respondents (41.2%) agree that certain learning/teaching techniques do impact mental health. The overwhelming majority of 164 (90.6 %) said that certain learning/teaching approaches made them feel uncomfortable. Only 17 (9.4%) said there would be no impact. However, the overwhelming majority (90.6 %) of respondents confirmed that the element of unique learning and teaching methods are causes for making emotional difficulties in students.

Table 1. Affective factors in Online Learning caused emotional disturbance

Affective Factors		Gender			
		Male		Female	
		Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Learning in front of a screen	Yes	110	69.6%	48	30.4%
	No	15	65.2%	8	34.8%
Learning at home instead of classroom learning	Yes	109	71.7%	43	28.3%
	No	16	55.2%	13	44.8%
unique learning/teaching methods	Yes	115	70.1%	49	29.9%
	No	10	58.8%	7	41.2%

New Emotional Tendencies - In the study, students were asked to explain their negative emotional changes in order to reveal the new emotional patterns they had developed during their online education. As the following Figure (3) illustrates, 171 of the 181 responders answered, with 10 failing to answer. According to the responses, the study discovered 6 of the most prevalent negative emotions that induce mental anguish in students. According to Figure (3) 171 respondents out of 181 reported feeling less motivated throughout the online learning



period. Twenty-six (26) respondents have struggled with feelings of isolation. Six (6) agreed that they felt more aggressive and violent than they had in the past. Another bad emotion reported by 12 respondents is a lack of attention to everyday duties. Five (5) respondents reported a lack of connection with others and a refusal to maintain strong relationships with others, particularly family members. The majority of the 171 respondents (68) have had to deal with all these negative aspects.

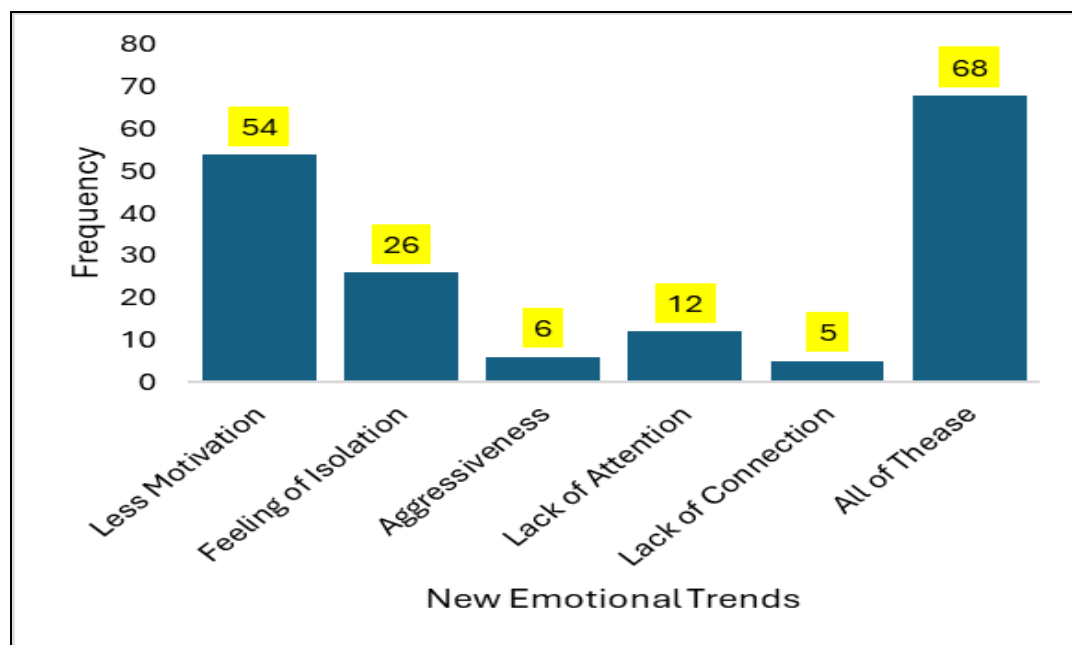


Figure 3. Emerging Trends in Emotional Changes Experienced by Students.

As a result, it is apparent that online education has both a negative and a positive aspect to it. Out of 181, 104 (60.5 %) responded have confirmed that they experience negative impacts most of the time rather than positive impacts. Another issue with online education is technical difficulties. A majority of 106 (61.6 %) respondents acknowledged that they are encountering technical challenges, which were causing them stress and concern of academic losses such as failing to submit assignments on time causing them to lose or decrease their marks. Because of these concerns with online education, 158 (87.3%) respondents have felt that learning in front of a computer makes them feel more emotionally uncomfortable than dealing with other materials such as books. According to 152 (84 %) respondents, learning at home makes them feel more emotionally uncomfortable than learning in a classroom. A majority of 129 (80.1 %) agree that maintaining continuous focus in online education is extremely challenging. As a result, it causes emotional alterations in people.

Another problem is a lack of peer support. A majority of 92 (57.2 %) respondents said they missed peer support throughout the online education period. It makes people feel helpless and alone. According to the respondents, it was a factor for the respondent's lack of engagement with others, particularly with family members. Other elements that cause students to experience emotional shifts in their minds include online education teaching and learning methods, as well as lecture approaches. Some of the reasons for this include the increase in learning hours, the increase in continual evaluations and examinations, the time of the lecture (early morning/ late night), and the quality of the lectures. A majority of 112 (62.9 %) respondents agreed that the nature of online education evaluation has caused them a lot of stress.

Another explanation is the flexibility of the lecture reported by 37.6%, as well as the increase in self-study hours reported by 31.1%. According to the findings, 34 (18.8%) respondents were receiving treatment for mental health difficulties before receiving online education, and



22 (35.5%) of those in that group feel that online education is to blame for the increase in such disorders during the pandemic. The survey also showed that the majority of students endure mental health concerns as a result of the Covid-19 epidemic. Of the 181 respondents, 59 (32.6 %) feel that they are suffering from mental health concerns that they have never had before.

Out of the 59 people who responded, 55 (38.2%) said it was due to the drawbacks of online education. These findings show that online education is accountable for causing emotional shifts in students and has a negative impact on their mental health. Finally, the outcomes of this study will be utilized to place greater emphasis on increasing the quality of online courses. Therefore, most educational institutions, as well as the government, must take the lead in providing students with the essential resources for online learning. These findings can be used to carry out sustainable development projects. Most importantly, as a faculty, we will be able to make students' future study plans easier, more comfortable, and free of negative impacts on their mental health.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the significant impact that online learning experiences have on the emotional well-being of students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Many students reported experiencing dramatic emotional changes, which have led to various mental health issues. The study's results underscore the necessity of acknowledging and addressing the emotional challenges associated with online education.

Despite the benefits of online learning, such as flexibility and accessibility, the emotional toll on students cannot be ignored. The transition to online education has revealed gaps in support systems and the need for more comprehensive approaches to student well-being. The emotional challenges faced by students during online learning are multifaceted, involving stress, isolation, and decreased motivation, among others.

Suggestions

Universities should develop robust mental health support systems tailored to the needs of online learners. This could include virtual counselling services, mental health workshops, and peer support groups. Training programs could focus on creating a supportive online learning environment and fostering student engagement. Implementing regular check-ins and feedback mechanisms to monitor students' emotional well-being is another strategy. This could be done through surveys, virtual office hours, or discussion forums where students can voice their concerns.

Encourage social interaction among students through virtual events, group projects, and interactive activities is another suggestion. Building a sense of community can help alleviate feelings of isolation and enhance emotional resilience. Further, increasing awareness about the emotional challenges of online learning among all stakeholders, including students, educators, and administrators is a must. Awareness campaigns can highlight the importance of emotional well-being and promote available resources and, most importantly conducting ongoing research to monitor the emotional impact of online learning and to develop evidence-based strategies for improvement should be developed as continuous feedback loops can help institutions adapt and refine their approaches to meet students' evolving needs.

By implementing these suggestions, educational institutions can better support students' emotional health and create a more balanced and effective online learning environment. Addressing the emotional aspects of online education is crucial for the overall success and well-being of students



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