

Coping with Psychological Issues Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic Times: Perspectives of Undergraduates of Non-State Universities

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic caused much upheaval to people's lifestyles worldwide/globally. Even university undergraduates had to switch from conventional physical classrooms to online learning. According to several studies, various issues pertaining to online learning have intensified the stress levels of undergraduates. This study adopted a qualitative approach. Primary data were gathered through structured interviews, from which coping mechanisms used by the students were identified based on a thematic analysis performed through NVIVO. Coping mechanisms played a critical role in ensuring these undergraduates' ability to handle their psychological issues and continue their academic work. The population included non-state undergraduates in Sri Lanka in the academic year 2020 and the sample size was 30. Findings revealed online learning, high workload, and IT infrastructure issues as key challenges undergraduates face during the pandemic. Among these, two main themes were identified as individual activities and group activities regarding coping mechanisms adopted by undergraduates to alleviate stress. This study recommends/highlights the importance of undergraduates engaging in such activities that help sustain their psychological status. Similarly, the study emphasized the role of universities and higher education institutes in facilitating and promoting such activities among their student population.

Keywords: *Coping strategies, COVID-19, Non-state Universities, Stress, Undergraduates*

Introduction

COVID-19 was first detected in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan of the Hubei Province, in China. Thereafter, it was claimed as a pandemic outbreak by March 2021 that spread rapidly worldwide. In Sri Lanka too, several measures were taken by the government such as nationwide lockdowns, mandatory quarantine, capacity and operational limitations and other social distancing

requirements. Accordingly, state, and non-state universities decided to temporarily suspend-campus activities and instead, underwent the transition into an online learning environment. This, together with government-imposed rules resulted in undergraduates spending most of their time at home, without physically interacting with the outside world as they used to be and having to adapt to extreme changes in their lifestyles. This situation was observed to have

considerably increased the level of stress and mental pressure among undergraduates globally.

Studies discovered many internal and external factors that would have contributed to such an increase in stress. Therefore, a pilot survey was conducted to determine the main factors that influence local undergraduates and whether there has been a significant psychological impact regarding their stress levels. Accordingly, it was revealed that the sample of undergraduates from a non-state university has experienced higher levels of stress based on the DASS-21 scale because of the pandemic. Further, high workload and IT infrastructure issues were the main causing factors. According to Yang *et al.* (2021), Academic problems have been regarded as the most common stressor for college students. students reported that the most significant daily hassles were academics-related stressors such as constant study, writing papers, preparing for exams, and boring teachers. In addition to that many students had IT infrastructure related issues such as uninterrupted electricity, lack of compatible device, lack of network and poor internet connectivity (Saha *et al.*, 2021).

In addition, the undergraduates faced many new challenges and had to suddenly adapt to new ways, thus step out of their comfort zones and regular lifestyle. These included heavy workload, difficulty in comprehending subject matters due to loss of face-to-face teacher-student interactions, worrying about semester grades, laptop breakdowns, unstable internet connections, having to share devices with others, electricity interruptions,

and the high costs of using devices and internet. All in all, this situation posed additional burdens on students, significantly increasing their stress levels (Madhusanka *et al.*, 2021).

Based on the above, that the research problem was determined as undergraduates of non-state universities faced psychological issues during the COVID-19 pandemic and adopted coping mechanisms for it.

With the expansion of globalization and intensifying competition, especially with new normal conditions like online learning, work from home etc., stress has become an increasingly important occupational health problem. Hence, it could be said that students in schools, undergraduates and employees must manage the stress at various levels based on their environment (Madhusanka *et al.*, 2021).

Son *et al.* (2020) found that the pandemic has increased the awareness of the mental state of various individuals. It is well known that the prevalence of epidemics heightens or brings about new types of stressors.

This condition affected the country's young generation, including the university undergraduates being considered in this study as they had to face and adapt to many drastic lifestyle changes. According to Aylie *et al.*, (2020), the steady spread of the virus created a need for isolation measures to be implemented. This led to the delayed re-opening of universities which influenced the undergraduates' psychological status. Even though there is a great impact it was stated that no detailed study focusing on the

psychological impact on these individuals during the epidemic was conducted.

Therefore, the aim and objective of this research was to identify coping mechanisms they have engaged in as a result. The research will focus on their situation during the year 2020 under pandemic times.

As mental health plays a major role in an individual's wellbeing and can have an intense impact on their day to day lives as well as their future. It should be highlighted that undergraduates are in a pivotal stage in their lives, as they have to learn to be independent and responsible adults while working towards a successful career by gaining higher education and getting into employment. Thus, managing their mental health is vital, if not, consequences will be detrimental in the long term. The COVID-19 virus is a novel issue and therefore there are not many in-depth studies regarding coping strategies that had to be adopted by this demographic during these times, within the context of Sri Lanka.

Therefore, this study will provide an understanding of the psychological status of undergraduates and what strategies they are employing to control their stress. These findings will be useful in handling stress of undergraduates due to online learning issues, their families, universities and higher educational institutes, government organization and other stakeholders and aid in making informed decisions. Subsequently, the findings could also be used as a guide for future research work.

Literature Review

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community (World Health Organization, 2022). More and more university students are being identified as a vulnerable group, with greater rates of anxiety, depressive disorders, substance misuse, and disordered eating than the general populace (Browning *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, mental health of this vulnerable population is burdened when their educational experience drastically alters, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on a study conducted on India, college students with very high anxiety or depression were at 68.8% moderate to severe at 28.1% and mild at 51.5%. Having a COVID-19-infected family member was found to relate to higher levels of anxiety and depression among undergraduates in the study (Chaudhary *et al.*, 2021).

According to qualitative data, university students' open-ended responses to a study by Browning *et al.* (2021) revealed that COVID-19 had a generally unfavorable impact on their psychological health and lifestyle choices. Lack of motivation, anxiety, tension, and loneliness were among the most regularly reported changes associated with the pandemic, as were social distancing, educational shifts, and going out less. As per Aristovnik *et al.* (2020), these psychological issues are not restricted to one country or another and symptoms are common across universities throughout the world. Many students are experiencing

greater levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms as a result of university education's new delivery and unpredictability, as well as technological concerns about online courses, being away from home, and social isolation at global scale.

According to Bhargava & Trivedi (2018) stress is considered a condition of mental pressure for particular individuals facing frequent environmental and social well-being related problems. When individuals are in their youth it can be considered as a critical period because at this time, they face many changes to their lives and there are numerous social expectations that they need to meet. Therefore, the students have to boost their stress management abilities to live healthier after entering society. They further uncovered that stress among the undergraduates primarily originates from academic requirements, financial concerns, relationship issues, employment prospects and lack of time management. There is a concern regarding intense academic expectations as it can cause stress which would result in sleep deprivation, changes in eating patterns and will negatively affect students' state of mind. In addition, according to the American College Health Association Fall 2018 National College Health Assessment, it shows that 63% of undergraduates in their country felt anxiety in the previous year and only 23% of them reported to have been treated by a psychiatrist due to anxiety in the previous year, thereby indicating that there is a need to encourage those who are experiencing such issues to obtain support.

When considering the workload impact on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, the most common cause of stress among college students has been identified as academic issues even before pandemic (Aldwin & Greenberger, 1987). Students in a study by Schafer (1996) reported that academic pressures including ongoing study, producing papers, exam preparation, and boring teachers were the most major daily problems. With outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, university learning has changed from on-campus to online. Many teachers used a continuous assessment system throughout the pandemic, replacing face-to-face exams with various learning objectives including quizzes and homework assignments. As an example of inquiry-based learning, these tasks could be identified as long-term debates, literature reviews, design projects with a team of learners, and writing assignments. Students were unexpectedly overburdened with time-consuming online learning activities and a long string of deadlines throughout the semester due to the pandemic nearly forcing all modules into remote learning at once. Further, a study conducted by Madushanka *et al* (2021) have revealed that undergraduates had faced more challenges in terms of university workload (75%) and they were worried about their semester grades and how the grades would affect their future. A survey conducted in China using more than 30 million college students revealed a strong correlation between perceived stress and academic burden during COVID-19 pandemic (Yang *et al.*, 2021). In another study conducted, nearly 60% of those polled said the shutdown had a "moderate" to "greatly

enhanced" impact on their workload (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2021).

When considering the IT infrastructure impact on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is evident from research that there are several gaps in online learning environments in higher education, such as a lack of adequate online learning infrastructure (hardware and software) at home. Many educational firms have planned and made available internet infrastructure for learning during this pandemic. Many undergraduates had faced more challenges in terms of IT capabilities and infrastructure (50%) (Madhusanka *et al.*, 2021). Providing these online infrastructures at a reasonable cost and making them available to all students regardless of their financial situation is still a difficult task at global scale (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). This is especially true for developing nations than developed nations. The shift to online learning has shown the digital divide between those with and those without access to reliable Internet infrastructure, laptops, and cell phones. Digital divide has been a key hindrance and cause of stress in developing nations such as Bangladesh. The digital divide is largely due to a lack of equal access. In addition to infrastructure costs, lack of skills, lack of information, and inefficient computers are major contributing elements to digital divide (Saha *et al.*, 2021).

When comes to Coping mechanisms, they are cognitive and behavioral approaches that we use to manage internal and external stressors (Algorani & Gupta, 2021). Chronic stress, if not adequately managed, can lead to emotional and psychosomatic

symptoms such as tiredness, depersonalization, and decreased professional or academic efficiency, especially among students. According to Adler & Park (2003), effective stress management may reduce the negative effects of stressful events on physical and mental health, although people's coping mechanisms vary. Various ways to deal with stress depend on a person's gender, education, age, overall health, and other aspects, such as the nature of the stressful circumstance and the person's personality.

Stress-related reactions such as rage, impatience, and denial can be harmful if not handled properly whereas emotional intelligence helps for better problem solving. When faced with difficult events and challenging situations, expressing emotions may help reduce melancholy and aggression. Emotion-focused and problem-focused coping methods are distinguished by some writers, while others distinguish between active and avoidant coping styles, or highlight maladaptive coping mechanisms (denial, substance abuse, emotional venting) that help reduce stress that is felt by the individual (Makarowski *et al.*, 2020).

Concerning coping, Polish university students most frequently employed the tactics of acceptance, planning, and seeking emotional support. Stress management practices during the pandemic was influenced by a variety of demographic parameters, including age, gender, and where people lived (Babicka-Wirkus *et al.*, 2021).

As per a study conducted in Vietnam medical students, regarding coping methods, approach strategies had a

higher mean than avoidant strategies. The most popular avoidant coping method was engaging in other activities to divert one's attention away from the problem at hand and doing something to make one's thoughts less focused on the latter. Acknowledging the problem has happened and learning to live with it were two popular coping strategies. Both strategies focused on trying to do something about the current situation and taking action to make it better (Thai *et al.*, 2021).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach which involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2010), the six components of the research design are purpose of the study, type of investigation, extent of researcher interference with the study, study setting, unit of analysis, and the time horizon of the study. Primary data were collected through structured interviews. Undergraduates were interviewed according to a pre-prepared set of questions with the aim of obtaining more detailed and in-depth understanding based on the research questions and objectives of this study. This was conducted via Zoom video platform. Everyone was interviewed around 30 minutes. The interviews were carried out in a conversational, less formal manner where participants were able to comfortably respond in detail. Considering the ethical aspects, data collected from the respondents through interviews were used only for educational purposes and Personally Identifiable Information (PII) were guaranteed confidentiality. From these interviews, the coping mechanisms used by the students were identified

based on a thematic analysis performed through NVIVO software.

Among two sampling methods, nonprobability methods of sampling are used for qualitative research studies and probability methods are used for quantitative research studies (Abedsaedi & Amiraliakbari, 2015).

By getting approach for this study mainly with the convenience sampling since the absence of sampling frame. As this study utilized a qualitative approach there cannot be used probability sampling techniques. Therefore, this study used the method of convenience sampling which continued until data saturation point was met. The population consisted of undergraduates from non-state universities enrolled in Sri Lanka in the academic year 2020. The sample size for interviews was 30 and it was determined according to the convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling was based on gender and academic year of the undergraduates. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample categorized under universities. In this study, the unit of analysis would be the individuals as interviews were conducted for everyone. The time horizon of this study was cross-sectional, whereas collection of data in the research study is limited only to one specific time.

Analysis & Results

Data was collected through conducting structured interviews with undergraduates, to gain an understanding of coping mechanisms of undergraduates to manage this situation.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Measurement	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender		
Male	15	50%
Female	15	50%
Age group		
Below 19	5	16.67%
20-22	10	33.33%
23-25	11	36.67%
Above 25	4	13.33%
Academic year		
First year	7	23.33%
Second year	5	16.67%
Third year	9	30%
Fourth year	9	30%
Working Status		
Working	10	33.33%
Not working	20	66.67%
Total	30	100%

Source: Authors' Calculation

The above Table 1 illustrates demographic characteristics of the sample respondents. In terms of gender composition, 50% of respondents are male and 50% are female. When considering the age group, most of the respondents were from the age group of 23-25 which represents 36.67% from the total sample. When considering the

academic year, majority of the respondents are in third year and fourth year which is 60%. Out of the sample, 10 (33.33%) respondents were employed and 20 (66.67%) were unemployed.

Table 2: Summary of Responses

Gender	Academic Year	Summary of Responses
Male	2	"I slept more, listened to music, and watched movies. When free I talked with my family members"
Female	2	"To release stress, I listened to music and watched movies or TV series. I also found sleeping helpful"
Female	3	"I exercised, listened to music, and liked to watch movies and TV series when possible. I would also sometimes read a book when possible"

Gender	Academic Year	Summary of Responses
Male	1	"I watched TV series and movies, listened to music on YouTube."
Male	2	"I cooked and baked a lot, and I watched movies. I would also listen to a music playlist"
Female	3	"I watched TV series and movies on Netflix, listened to music on YouTube."
Female	2	"I listen to music and also sleeping was helpful to release my stress"
Female	3	"Most of times I prefer reading books and articles"
Male	4	"Mostly I listened to music, have a chat with my friends as well as learn how to make animation videos. I also enjoyed painting when I felt stressed those days"
Male	3	"I watched TV series and movies, listened to music on YouTube."
Female	4	"I did some gardening as it helps me to reduce my stress"
Female	2	"I watched movies, teledramas and also play volleyball with my neighbors"
Female	3	"In my free time I used to have a chat with my family members and friends"
Male	4	"I love to do exercises as it helped me to reduce my stress levels"
Male	1	"I used to read a lot specially novels and short stories"
Female	4	"I listen to calming music and also read books"
Female	4	"I enjoyed painting a lot. I also read books and watch TV series"
Male	3	"I listened to music on YouTube and watched teledramas on Youtube"
Male	1	"Mostly I like drawing and sketching, also I read magazines"
Male	4	"Most of times I listened to music on YouTube and Spotify, also watched movies"
Female	4	"I like drawing and sketching and reading books"
Female	4	"I watched TV series and movies, listened to music on YouTube."
Male	1	"I did some daily exercises which helped me to release my stress levels a lot"
Female	1	"I sleep when I was stressed. Also, I rode my bicycle and spent a lot of time with my family"
Male	4	"Spending time with my family members was very helpful me to reduce my stress". I also listen to calming music"

Gender	Academic Year	Summary of Responses
Male	3	“I like drawing and sketching and listen to calming music. I also read books, watch movies and TV dramas as well as sleep to relax”
Male	1	“I watched TV series and movies, listened to music, and slept. I would also play cricket with my relations”
Male	1	“Mostly I listened to music, talked with my friends as well as learn how to make animation videos. I also enjoyed painting when I felt stressed those days
Female	3	“I continued reading and listened to music. Sometimes I sleep when I was stressed. Also, I rode my bicycle and spent a lot of time with my family”
Female	3	“I listened to music, watched movies and dramas. Also did some gardening, cooking & reading”

Source: Authors' illustration based on analysis

The above table illustrates the responses which have gathered from the participants who were participated in the interviews.

Thematic Analysis

After transcribing the results obtained from respondents, as a qualitative analysis, a thematic analysis was conducted by using NVIVO software. The purpose of conducting a thematic analysis was to identify the most important coping mechanisms that undergraduates have used to overcome challenges faced during the pandemic situation.

The analysis was carries out by familiarizing oneself with the obtained data. In the process of familiarizing and identifying key ideas based on the interview transcripts, all authors conducted an independent parallel coding for generating initial codes. When compiling the generated codes, it was recognized that several codes were overlapping. Those overlapped codes were taken for further processing of the

analysis as the same process enhances the validity of the qualitative data analysis process.

Accordingly, based on the thematic analysis, 2 themes based on 13 codes have been identified as coping mechanisms. When the authors compiled the set of codes, authors notified that there are overlapping concepts with a meaningful saturation for the obtained data with the interview process. Table 2 below specifies the identified themes and responses for the question “What are the stress release mechanisms or hobbies you used for your psychological wellbeing?”. Further, the most significant mechanisms are displayed prominently. Thus, according to this visualization output, ‘watched movies and series’ was the coping mechanism widely used which is also indicated by the largest font size. In addition, listening to music, watching YouTube videos, reading books were also common responses.

for undergraduates, which is in line with this study. Furthermore, Son et al. (2020) similarly revealed physical exercises, enjoying streaming services and social media, listening to music, reading and drawing, communicating with their families and friends were some of the common mechanisms that students adopted during the pandemic to manage their stress such activities were also stated by respondents during this study. As such, it is reasonable to state that most previous research findings were confirmed in this present study. Complementary to this study Chandra (2020) identified that undergraduates would partake in various creative activities and take up courses to learn new skills. Faize and Husain (2020) also uncovered individual and group coping mechanisms that are in line with the findings of this study such as spending time with family members, helping parents in the kitchen and other household tasks, watching movies and gaining new skills by attending online courses on cooking, painting and learning languages. Saha et al. (2021) also revealed that, similar to this study, communicating with their family and friends were among the primary group activities that students would participate in to cope with their stress.

Conclusion

The pilot survey conducted revealed that non-state undergraduates have experienced higher levels of stress due to the pandemic, and the major life changes that were brought on as a result. Hence, the study aimed to identify the coping mechanisms that these undergraduates adapted / participated in during these times to

manage their stress due to online learning necessitated with the pandemic. Accordingly, based on analysis of interview data, two main themes or categories of mechanisms were identified. They are firstly, individual activities, which were mainly listening to music, watching movies or TV series, sleeping, and reading books. Secondly the group activities were spending time with family, close relatives, and friends. Therefore, the findings can be established that undergraduates in Sri Lanka had to endure high stress levels and psychological strain; therefore, they felt the need to engage in several individual and group activities, to ensure they can take care of their mental health/well-being.

It was determined that the increased psychological issues in terms of stress among undergraduates of non-state universities, were brought on by aspects such as IT infrastructure and university workload. Therefore, universities must identify root causes behind these issues and come up with an action plan to support students in these aspects. For example, universities and authorities can identify significant issues and prioritize these to offer solutions in this regard, for e.g., what are the IT related issues that students face and communicate these to internet service providers to collaborate and come up with a solution. Additionally, universities can conduct training sessions for those who lack technical skills and provide computers/devices, easy payment, or subsidized schemes for students to purchase such devices and other equipment for student who may not have access to them. In terms of university learning workload, the

lecturers can be instructed to not overload undergraduates with work, rather promote an open dialogue for students to approach them and voice out their concerns.

Furthermore, as this study gives insight into what types of coping strategies were adopted by the sample, similar activities should be promoted and facilitated among undergraduates to manage their mental health.

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