

Please cite this article as: Victor, S., Arif, A., Yusuf, S., Ling, L.Y. (2021). Online learning conditions and psychological distress among ipta students during the movement control orders (MCO). *The Asian Journal of Professional and Business Studies Volume 2* (1).

ONLINE LEARNING CONDITIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS DURING THE MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has hampered educational development as the nation prioritises measures to regulate and flatten the infection curve. Malaysia implemented the Movement Control Order (MCO) to practise social distancing, which resulted in the closure of all educational institutions throughout Malaysia, forcing the learning process to be continued through online measures, with students across the country striving to make online learning the new norm. As a consequence of this situation, many students experienced psychological anguish while attempting to meet the challenges of the changing world. Thus, this study aims to investigate the online learning condition and psychological distress among Malaysian Public University (IPTA) students during the Movement Control Order. This cross-sectional designed study involved students from 15 public universities as a population and a sample of 139 randomly selected samples. The modified and disseminated questionnaire showed a reliability of 0.901 for the online learning condition and 0.906 for psychological discomfort. The results showed that online learning circumstances had a substantial impact on psychological discomfort. The Ministry of Higher Education, in collaboration with university administrations, should strive to improve online learning conditions for all Malaysian students, as well as create strategies to address psychological discomfort caused by the pandemic new norm appropriateness. This is to guarantee that students are better equipped to continue their education by maximising the use of the online platform for a more effective learning experience.

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

MCO,
online learning,
psychological distress,
public university |

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The effect of COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a strong impact on Malaysia (Asita Elengoe, 2020). Upon the detection of the first case in January, the (Ministry of Health) MOH devised standard guidelines for COVID-19 management. Eventually, the first case confirmation and a hike in the numbers infected followed by two deaths resulted to the announcement of Movement Control Order (MCO). The fear of being afflicted by the COVID-19 has consumed many people across the globe and has created series of fears, confusions and suspicions among all of humanity to the point that many people who had not even been diagnosed with the virus cost their lives (Zarghami, 2020). In the Malaysian context, a 62-year old patient under investigation for COVID-19, committed suicide in Serdang Hospital, Selangor, due to depression apparently. On March 24th, the Health Ministry's Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC) and Mercy Malaysia launched a support hotline for anyone affected by the current crisis. Since then, a third of all calls received has been psychologically related and this number is expected to increase as the virus continues to spread. Since then, Malaysians experiencing mental illness saw a hike. With that, MOH published a well-described guidelines on "Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in COVID-19". As of the 22nd September 2020, there were 10,276 COVID-19 cases including 130 deaths and 9395 cases of recovery was reported by the Ministry of Health (MOH) in Malaysia.

COVID-19 is a highly infectious virus which spreads rapidly among humans and has been considered responsible for having tremendous health, social and economic impacts on any environment (Aylward & Liang, 2020). Therefore, among the restriction were kindergartens, government, and private schools including daily schools, boarding schools, international schools, tahfiz centers, other primary, secondary and pre-university institutions to be closed. Public and higher education institutions and skill training institutes nationwide were closed too were imposed as part of MCO as well. The implementation and extension of the MCO along with prohibition imposed by the Malaysian government on crossing state border had at least half the student population stranded in most Malaysian universities and being stripped of their routine of daily habits to avoid social interactions. In addition, students that were unable to go home were left feeling insecure and anxious forcing them to be mentally disturbed with the condition. Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Psychiatry Department Faculty of Medicine clinical psychologist reported that restriction on movement and social contact on students might lead to intense boredom, emotional instability and other psychological issues.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The introduction of online learning at all IPTA campuses has been met with mixed reactions, mostly owing to a lack of internet access in certain areas, as well as the economic and demographic disparities experienced by students across Malaysia. This caused a lot of anxiety since online learning was still in its infancy and was very seldom fully adopted to become the new standard. Not to mention that learning conditions for kids are not only dependent on the students' own efforts, but also on the environment, technological, and financial stability in which they are placed. As a result, it is critical to assess the degree of online learning conditions among students at Malaysian public universities throughout the MCO period. Several organisations, including the Women's Aid Organization and *Talian Kasih*, reported an increase in contacts of 44 percent and 57 percent, respectively, after the government's issuance of the Movement Control Order (MCO), one of the grounds for which is domestic violence. A student suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of a previous family trauma may find it necessary to remain with his or her family in order to maintain greater touch with them. This may result in catastrophe and a lack of concentration in school. As a result, it is critical to assess the degree of psychological discomfort experienced by students at Malaysian public universities throughout the MCO period. A study of this kind may spur further research into measures to prevent mental illness among students and strive toward the production of graduates who are both academically well-versed and psychologically stable as well.

Students, lecturers, and parents have all made significant contributions to meeting the educational needs of the present situation, which includes: As a result of the current breakout of the Covid-19 epidemic, it may be concluded that Malaysia's educational system has undergone a pragmatic transformation. This research will aid in the development of a better and

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improved environment, as well as recommendations for improving the online learning environment in order to improve the education quality of Malaysian university students and thus create better graduates. The fear of COVID-19 and MCO has been shown to have negative effects on students because they cause hopelessness, fear, and stigma in addition to negatively impacting the students' educational endeavours (Bashar et al., 2020). In order to reduce the stress level of students, this research would seek to determine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between online learning conditions and psychological well-being. As a result of this study, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) will be better equipped to identify the needs of Malaysian public university students in order to improve the online learning environment as well as reduce psychological distress in order to produce a better generation for the country.

Fear, concern, and anxiety were among the feelings that were often exhibited throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in psychological discomfort and eventually stress and depression in the affected individual. The majority of Malaysian students were ultimately evacuated from their living campuses and retreated back to their hometowns as a result of an effort undertaken by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MOH) to combat the pandemic. According to the psychological officer of Universiti Malaysia Pahang Student Affairs and Alumni Department, among the most frequent problems students experience during the MCO are concerns about their academics, fear of contracting an infection, and homesickness. As soon as possible after the COVID-19-related halt in the education learning process was implemented, online learning was implemented, resulting in students from all over Malaysia enrolled in Malaysian public universities participating in this as a means of ensuring that the education flow was not disrupted. A required step was taken since the global closure of educational institutions has impacted educational processes, creating major delays in terms of teaching and learning, as well as delayed assessments, leading to the cancellation of numerous public certification exams (M. AbuKarim, 2020). Specifically, according to Salleh et al., 2020, "online education is a technique that may assist both lecturers and students, particularly during Movement Control Order (MCO), when most schools and universities are forced to shut their doors as a result of Covid-19."

According to Maase' et al. (2003), psychological distress resulting in people to develop validated culturally sensitive, multidimensional scales to be used in the assessment of psychological distress. According to Ridner (2003), (a) stress: a non-specific biological response to a demand or stressor that is not necessarily harmful to the individual. (b) Distress: a non-specific, biological or emotional response to a demand or stressor that is harmful to the individual. (c) Biological distress: potentially harmful physiological changes that occur in the human body in response to a stressor. (d) Psychological distress: the unique discomforting, emotional state experienced by an individual in response to a specific stressor or demand that results in harm, either temporary or permanent, to the person. Online learning is not uncommon anymore to every students during this pandemic. Lot of faculty members get training to use online learning platforms either as the only delivery mode or as an add-on to face to face teaching (Lim M, 2020, as cited in Muacevic & Adler, 2020). Many universities do not have enough infrastructure or resources to facilitate online teaching with immediate effect (Muacevic & Adler, 2020). The worldwide rapid increase of infected cases has created a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about what is going to happen. It has also caused a tremendous level of stress among the university fraternity, inclusive of students. This stress may lead to unfavourable effects on the learning and psychological health of students (Al-Rabiaahab et al., 2020). This can be supported by Xiao (2020) that stated, continuous dissemination, strict isolation measures, and online learning problems at all levels of education are expected to affect mental health, including students. |

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted quantitatively using a cross-sectional design by utilizing an online survey as the main instrument of data collection, in which the online learning condition and the psychological distress are treated as variables. Students from 15 Malaysian public universities make up the study's population. A group of 139 students from various fields of study were subjected to psychological distress as a result of online learning conditions while following the Malaysian movement control order. To ensure that every member of the population had a chance of being chosen, 139 participants were chosen via simple random sampling, in which respondents were given an online-google-form questionnaire sent out to university representatives. In terms of ethical considerations, prior to filling out the questionnaire, the students' permission to participate in this research was obtained. It was completely optional and anonymous to participate. As soon as the mobility

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restriction order was enforced, a survey was sent out to students from these 15 Malaysian universities through WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and email.

The first section of the research instrument consist of demographic questions of the place of study, education level, age group and location of respondent which are close ended questions. The second section of the instrument consist of independent variable of this research that is online learning condition. The operational definition of online learning condition is student’s environment learning conduciveness while on an online platform compromising the emotional, technical and involvement regards during online classes. It compromises 21 questions in this section in the form of Likert scale measurement. The third section of the instrument consist of dependent variable of this research that is psychological distress. This section has been adapted from The Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale by William W. K. Zung (1965) to suit this research. The operational definition of psychological distress would be the form of emotion relating to stressors that are difficult to cope on without an effective care faced by students. It compromises 16 questions in this section in the form of Likert scale measurement.

Before conducting the study, a pre-test was conducted, and the Cronbach’s alpha was found to be 0.901 for online learning condition and 0.906 for psychological distress, reflecting a good level of reliability. After data collection was completed, there was a total of 142 survey forms successfully collected. However, the usable data is 139 after the process of data cleaning and screening. Then SPSS version 26 is applied to analyze the data. The reliability of the actual test is also recorded. Descriptive analysis is then done to determine the level of the variables. Subsequently, exploratory data analysis (EDA) were run to identify the occurrence of the significant relationship between online learning condition and psychological distress.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This findings of this study has revealed a moderate level of online learning condition and a moderate level of psychological distress. This moderate level of online learning condition and psychological distress is relating to the fact that the researchers are doing and collecting all of the data that were needed for this study during Movement Control Order (MCO). The researchers are unable to get a full access to collect their data.

Students’ moderate learning condition shows that they are adjusting to the shift in education system. Adapting to difficulties in learning environment may affect education process. In line with researches by Alipio, (2020) inferred that poor internet connectivity, financial issues, and lacking technology devices occurs as a challenge when exposed to online. This is because the quality of education for students should not be disturbed while taking into consideration efforts to develop and enhance the quality of online education to be conveyed in such predicaments (Affouneh et al., 2020) as well as to provide ease to the mode of it so students would be able to utilize it as much as possible (Cojocariu et al., 2014).

Table 1: Level of Online Learning Condition and Psychological Distress

| Variables | Percent | Mean | SD |
|---------------------------|---------|------|------|
| Online Learning Condition | | 2.17 | .483 |
| Low (1 ± 2.33) | 4.3 | | |
| Moderate (2.34 ± 3.66) | 71.2 | | |
| High (3.67 ± 5) | 20.9 | | |
| Psychological Distress | | 2.17 | .483 |
| Low (1 ± 2.33) | 4.3 | | |
| Moderate (2.34 ± 3.66) | 71.2 | | |

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High (3.67 ± 5)

20.9

There are three values of percentage of all 139 participants who admits that they are struggling with stress which automatically implying that they are indeed in a state of emotional suffering or more known as psychological distress. The first value is low, moderate and high. Out of 139 participants, 4.3% experience low level of psychological distress. Unfortunately, 71.2% out of 139 participants experience moderate level of psychological distress and 20.9% of them experience high level of psychological distress. The mean score for Psychological distress is 2.17 and the standard deviation is .483. The result of this predictor shows a consistent finding with previous study (Burke et al., 2020).

Using a Pearson product- moment correlations, it was determined that the ($r=.392$) which also indicating the direction and the magnitude between online learning condition and psychological distress in IPTA students. The direction of this study's independent variables, online learning condition and dependent variable, dependent variable is positive. However, using Guilford's Rule of Thumb the relationship between online learning condition and psychological distress is low. The inferential of the correlation, $\text{sig-}r= 0.000$, which resulting in H_0 being rejected and H_A is accepted indicating there is a significance relationship between online learning condition and psychological distress in IPTA students during movement control order, MCO and the test scores is at .05 level of significance. (alpha value $<.05$).

Table 2: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation

| Variables | <i>r</i> | <i>sig-r</i> |
|---------------------------|----------|--------------|
| Online Learning Condition | .392 | .000 |
| Psychological Distress | | |

The apparent difference between face-to-face and distance learning and the accompanying environmental variables that affect distance learners make the impact of anxiety on distance learning more likely (Ajmal and Ahmad, 2019). Gibbs, Habeshaw, and Habeshaw (1989) put it succinctly, 'Anxiety causes students to consistently underperform. Anxiety in distance learners stems mainly from their life experiences, and expectations/ assumptions they make as a result. The distance learners tend to fear failure, yet conversely can have high, even unrealistic expectations of themselves.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Education is undoubtedly a difficult experience for students. At this pace, it will be fascinating to discover more about the effects of stress on students' academic performance. Due to the prevalence of this pandemic, it has become necessary to redefine the readiness of Malaysian students for online learning in order to prevent their mental health from being adversely affected in the future. A moderate degree of online learning condition was discovered, as was a moderate level of psychological distress as a result of this research. There is a statistically significant connection between online learning conditions and psychological distress; however, the strength of that relationship is moderate in comparison to other relationships. Given these results, it is imperative that online education be improved, and it is equally essential to create methods and strategies for dealing with psychological distress when participating in an online educational programme. It is critical to ensure the security of services such as the use of technological devices in order to offer psychological assistance (Xiang et al., 2020).

As much as implementation of online education is relevant today, education on mental health and awareness on this issue too needs to be addressed. This would help students to abolish their negative view on psychological distress and instead seek help on the pertaining matter due to educational stress during MCO at times of the pandemic. Albeit the psychological distress online learning condition may result in, it is important to come together to work on finding better ways to improve this situation and make use of the online platforms available. This study would work useful for future study to investigate

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more aspects on online learning condition and psychological distress with a different group of study subject. This research should also be done on lecturers as well as university management to obtain results from various perspectives. This would allow researchers to understand the viewpoint of these subjects as well.

Future research could explore some information on respondent's social economic status in the demographic part as well. This is due to the fact that the economic element has an impact on a student's online learning condition, which in turn has an impact on psychological distress. In addition, future research should look at methods to enhance the conditions of online learning in order to offer better platforms for online education, which would make it much more successful for students in the long run. Universities should rethink the channels and methods they use to provide instruction and evaluate students in order to enhance the online learning environment. Likewise, studies in the future should be focused on helping students reduce psychological distress so that they can examine their mental well-being and make steps to improve it. In addition, it is critical for future studies to focus their research on psychological distress and online learning conditions at the faculty level in order to identify and address the gaps that have been identified in their specific educational demands, as well as to act as a helping effort during times of distress due to the pandemic. |

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