



The Pandemic's Correlation to College Students' Social Anxiety

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Synthesizing scholarship on the COVID-19 pandemic, issues of social anxiety, and the experiences of college students, Eriyon Tecson offers a comparative, contextualized summary of two major studies measuring college students' stress and anxiety during the early stage of the pandemic, arguing that further research and action is vital to ensure that college students remain successful in higher education. This essay was written for Research Methods in Psychology with Dr. James Vaughn.

ABSTRACT

My paper will survey scholarship on social anxiety and how its triggers and stresses affect learning. This research reveals how social anxiety has not only played its role in the lives of college students, but also how the pandemic has driven and elevated such problems among a general population that has been affected since COVID-19 began. Many college students have experienced a lack of trust and had a difficulty reaching out for help, even when it was available. Due to isolation, lack of confidence, newness to remote learning, and fears/worries stemming from complications of COVID, the pandemic has reduced mental health to a crucial state for a vulnerable population of college students. I have summarized two

studies that bring awareness to students' perceptions on their personal mental health, institutional changes/adjustments, and stress/anxiety levels pertaining to multiple factors that many students have faced since the pandemic, factors including financial instability, sleep apnea, lack of concentration, and even death. One will find that the pandemic itself has caused a spiraling decline in normalcy and mental health, along with increased social anxiety.

Keywords: social anxiety, COVID-19, academic performance, mental health, isolation, stress, depression, college students

IN THE PAST YEAR, while dealing with COVID-19 and the pandemic as a whole, there have been noticeable effects on the average college student. Social anxiety has imploded the minds of this generation of college students, and the effects itself have not been positive. Social anxiety yields interactions that cause irrational anxiety, fear, self-consciousness, and embarrassment. This has been a result of what the pandemic has brought to a college student's front door, complicating their reaction when dealing with themselves or other people. It has taken away drive, motivation, and comfort among normal human interactions, robbing students of mental expansion. This has become a growing problem that has shaken up and hindered college students all around.

Diving deep into a solution could bring forth growth in college students' academic development, as well as educational prosperity. The vision here is that college students will be brought from the depths of self-anxiety and despair, relearning a better, more flexible normal that increases a college student's success when entering into their career and life beyond college. The benefits of renewal to this problem will bring forth mental stability and abilities to target stressors and triggers, as well as cultivating a new way of teaching and/or academic system where students will rise.

For qualitative and quantitative reasons, I myself have seen firsthand college students' struggle with anxiety, demotivation, and

lack of confidence since COVID-19 has displayed itself. Dropout rates have increased tremendously, and the effects of stress on students have revealed themselves in forms of severe anxiety disorders and depression. These factors have affected students' daily lives and mental processes for dealing with tasks and completing work. The pandemic even connects to the lack of social skills students have experienced since being in total isolation for a long period of time.

Many people know someone in their family or friend circle who attends or has attended college. Many have heard complaints from students who fought harder for academic success and strived harder for normalcy. With grades and GPAs lowering, we know that this is something we need to solve, for one has to shine light on the matter behind our decreasing number of college students and how social anxiety has put them in an inescapable box. The concern here is to bring strength back to students academically, mentally, and even emotionally.

Social anxiety appears as error in thought and actions based on or off one's environment dealing in the past, present, and/or visions of the future. Anxiety itself is an affective reaction to danger (Hallowell, 1941) and can vary in level, depending on the species. This brings into question the severity of social anxiety and how it connects to each individual person in frequency and resulting actions. Anxiety, in a way, is a good thing, because it provokes caution and keeps us safe if sensors go off indicating danger, but sometimes too much of a good thing can become bad for us.

Many external and internal factors interact with social anxiety triggers among college students. One's environments and upbringing dictate how one thinks, perceives, and reacts. When one is surrounded by negative factors and traumatic events, it affects the regression in our cognitive behaviors. This may very well be related to PTSD, social anxiety, and how we cope with matters we cannot cognitively handle. Look at this as an overload of worry concerning fear-based factors we have no control over. Accordingly, we lose

self-confidence, lack self-esteem, sense of personhood, and even verbal communication skills (Felman, 2021).

Since the onset of COVID-19, social anxiety has paved its way into the lives of college students and has triggered remembrance of tragedy and trauma while students try to continue functioning normally in everyday life. COVID itself has done more damage than many thought possible. Social anxiety is produced from fear, and with what this pandemic has done, fear is all we have lived in since it began. COVID-19 was and still is a tragic occurrence within itself. Many lives and livelihoods have been lost (Murray, 2020). Families have been torn apart, along with people's hope that the pandemic would find its way to an end.

College students have faced many obstacles since the rise of COVID-19. This catastrophe is considered to be on the level of the 1918 Spanish flu and has surpassed the rapid speed of spread associated with HIV/AIDS (Murray, 2020). When observing COVID-19 and its effects in general, we look at factors such as unemployment, financial instability, health issues, death, and much more. The pandemic itself has brought about unique obstacles for students and faculty, including dropped enrollment rates and financial loss due to lack of revenue following students dropping out (Kelly & Columbus, 2020). Due to institutions closing because of the worldwide lockdown, college students who also qualify for work-study jobs have lost opportunities for income, and even those who work outside of school lost income because the majority of businesses were put on lockdown as well. No money means no school or continuation of education. Many students were already dealing with financial stresses related to higher education, and COVID simply heightened the worries that were already there.

Academic factors have taken a toll as well in correlation to a students' wellbeing since COVID-19 began. With colleges making the big change to remote learning, it has not been an easy and smooth transition. Students have made voiced preference for face-to-face learning rather than remote learning (Abbasi et al., 2020). College

students' unfamiliarity with remote learning caused even more stress: Not only are students in complete isolation dealing with worries and fears of the pandemic, but they are now having to deal with a whole new system of learning opposite from what they're used to. It's also important to take into account research appearing in the *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, showing that students with higher anxiety rates have had higher procrastination rates; this affects students' learning ability, and the study doesn't even take into consideration that people have different and complex learning mechanisms (Macher et al., 2012).

College students have also faced many outside factors that put them at a disadvantage when dealing with COVID and the social anxiety that follows. Students may believe that the worst of the pandemic is over, but they also feel less optimistic about the economy. That could have a lot to do with social stresses. Being forced out of normalcy into the unknown raises stresses within and between those around. Isolation itself has forced students to get used to not reaching out, decreasing social interaction, and encountering uncertainty tied to lack of self-determination (Bogdanova & Rezvushkin, 2021). Students have lost family members and had to mourn while function in a new setting at the same time, which brings intense mental friction and other challenges.

The article "95% of college students' mental health impacted by COVID-19" reports high percentages of students experiencing depression symptoms, lack of sleep, lack of focus, increased sadness and irritability, self-doubt, poor time management, struggles of laziness, rising anxiety, poor eating habits, and much more (Denton, 2021). Struggles engaging in courses and a lack of campus activities also affect us when dealing with the dopamine release in our bodies, which is our happy chemical. All these topics add up to an increase in social anxiety for college students since COVID has risen, and distance learning has only put more of a load on each individual when coping with COVID-19.

Previous research has found that there is a direct relation to COVID-19 and social anxiety from a college student's standpoint. Among college students there is a direct correlation between COVID-19 and triggers of social anxiety. Viewing all the factors at hand that play a part in the regression of students' mental health and academic standing has proven that there is a problem at hand that needs to be exposed and remedied for the betterment of college students in a successful higher education setting. There needs to be a fight for better learning mechanisms that accommodate each individual at their own learning ability.

FIRST EXTERNAL STUDY

Participants

ON APRIL 18TH IN 2020, a study was conducted by Abbasi et al. (2020) with students from Liaquat College of Medicine and Dentistry. Software known as Raosoft was used for calculating a sample size considering the campus consisted of 800 students total, 300 being BDS (Bachelor of Dental Surgery) and 500 MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery). Keeping the margin of error at 3.68%, confidence interval at 95%, and population size of 800, the sample size was calculated as 377. The convenience sampling technique was used to decide the students that would be picked in the study. Questionnaires were emailed to all students and informed consent was obtained from all.

Materials/Procedures

An administered questionnaire with 23 items total was given on a five-point Likert scale between (1), "strongly disagree," and (5) "strongly agree," where 5 of the questions were about demographics, 1 determined choice of gadgets for e-learning, and 17 established positive and negative perceptions on e-learning from students' perspectives. Before the study was fully conducted, a validation by two medical educationists was done, and a pilot test was run with 30

participants. From this pilot, the reliability of the questionnaire was calculated to be .85.

Of the 23 items, 17 of those items were grouped into five categories regarding future learning preference, "E-teaching is better than traditional teaching," "Quality of e-teaching is satisfactory, Impact of e-learning is less," "Student-Teacher interaction (isolation increase)," and "Online teaching is not secure." Data analysis for SPSS version 23 was used and a mean was calculated for the 17 items ranging in between 17-85, showing a mean of 43. If the score of the individual was under 43 it was considered a positive outlook on e-learning and if it was above 43, a negative outlook. Of the 17 items, grouped into five, each min, max, and mean was calculated as such: "Future learning preference" 5 items (Score min 5 & max 25, mean 13), "E-teaching is better than traditional teaching" 4 items (Score min 4 & max 20, mean 10), "Quality of e-teaching is satisfactory" 2 items (Score min 2 & max 10, mean 5), "Impact of e-learning is less" 1 item (Score min 1 & max 5, mean 3).

Results

There were a total of 382 MBBS and BDS students who participated in this study. Results came back with findings that 76% of students use Mobile for their e-learning and 75.7% have negative perceptions towards e-learning. An independent T-test was applied for data analysis along with frequencies and percentages being computed for demographics. Overall, the study presents 86 students (23%) with positive results and 296 (77%) with negative results. For positive, we're given a mean of 37.5455, standard deviation of 6.27540, and standard error mean of 1.09241. For negative, we're given a mean of 58.7249, standard deviation of 8.16173, and standard error mean of 0.43689. The p-value is .015 (15%).

Discussion

Overall, 86% of students felt that e-learning had little positive impact on academic development. Many preferred face-to-face, and these results suggest that e-learning was something students were not ready for. After the pandemic outbreak, many students moved online and found experiences less appealing, results that coincide with students in other places and countries. Even before COVID, there was research conducted to gauge perceptions of e-learning, and mixed signals were given, but now there is a tremendous effect on student populations. A paper presented in Singapore over mobile learning put forth a case that e-teaching limits student-teacher interaction, which is congruent with Abbasi et al.'s (2020) findings. This research shows that students are not ready for e-learning.

SECOND EXTERNAL STUDY

Participants

A STUDY WAS CONDUCTED BY Son et al. (2020) on students at a large university system in Texas to determine mental health and wellbeing of students while dealing with the pandemic. All campuses were closed March 23, 2020, and classes were then held virtually in response to COVID-19. The researchers interviewed 266 students total, but due to missing data points from some students, 195 students were calculated and accounted for in the results of this study, including 111 female students and 84 male students. About 70% of students were juniors/seniors, and they were all recruited by undergraduate student researchers through text, email, and snowball sampling. The only inclusion criterion for the study was that students has to be undergraduates at the time of the interviews. Verbal consent was obtained, and it was approved by the university's institutional review board.

Materials/Procedures

The study was conducted by 20 undergraduate researchers who study qualitative methods and decided to use the Perceived Stress Scale-10 (PSS) to obtain their overall results. The goal was to document students' coping mechanisms and stress association mid-pandemic. The interviews were conducted via Zoom with audio recording. None of the authors interviewed students themselves. An artificial intelligence service known as Otter.ai was used to transcribe all the recordings. Participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire about their demographic information, including age, gender, year of college, and program of study, before completing the interview. Qualitative and quantitative methods were applied for data analysis.

First, demographics were set on a PSS score with ratings on PSS-10 survey items. A total PSS score per participant was calculated by first reversing the scores of the positive items (4-7, 9, and 10) and then adding all the ten scores. A mean (SD) PSS score was computed to evaluate the overall level of stress and anxiety among the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, to understand the impact of the pandemic on college students, 12 questions were asked for each category dealing with academics, health, and lifestyle-based factors. Thematic analysis was used to acquire qualitative answers about these stressors. A single coder (CS), using an open coding process, identified themes and analyzed the transcripts. Two other PhD student coders (XW and AS) and a postdoctoral at the same university were brought in to resolve discrepancies among related themes and discuss saturation. The computer program MAXQDA was also used to carry out qualitative analysis (VERBI GmbH).

Results

Of the 195 students, 70% indicated increased stress and anxiety, 20% felt neutral, and 9% felt a decrease. About 54% of students felt

negative impacts from academics and lifestyle-related outcomes. About 91% of students felt an increased level of fear and worry pertaining to their own health and that of loved ones. When it came to academic work and concentration, 89% indicated difficulty in the matter due to various distractions from the environment. Things like too much internet and social media, lack of accountability, chores, and family members, coincide with this percentage. When it came to sleep pattern disruptions, 86% indicated COVID-19 had increased such problems, with a one third of them reporting it to be severe. Yet again, 86% of the students believed the pandemic caused an increase in social isolation and 67% expressed significant change in living conditions in a negatively impactful way. Of the 195 students, 44% (86) felt depressive thoughts and 82% showed great stress and concern about academic performance due to remote learning. Financial concerns for students were recorded at 59% due to job opportunities being put off and family members or students themselves losing their jobs during the pandemic.

Discussion

The study by Son et al. (2020) brings great focus and awareness to the pandemic and how it relates to mental health among a specific population (college students) that has been greatly affected. By conducting this online survey amid the pandemic, the researchers revealed an increased anxiety and stress due to the pandemic. The most significant worry that was identified with this study was the matter of one's own health and the health of loved ones, followed by lack of concentration. These findings also coincide with a recent study in China that also found the same issues to be highly prevalent among the general population during the pandemic. I believe students' lack of confidence has stemmed from significant changes in student life that deal with social distancing, shelter in place orders, changes in social relationships, and irregular patterns dealing with sleep and food consumption, the outcomes of which share likeness

with depressive symptoms and anxiety. The 44% of students reported to have increased depressive thoughts amount to a call for concern when dealing with the pandemic.

This could also lead to suicidal thoughts and suicidal ideation. When it came to reaching out for help from authorities among services for dealing with mental health, there were barriers in place because students experienced low comfort levels in sharing mental health with others and a lack of trust in counseling services on their college campus. With this information presented, there is indeed a need for immediate attention and support for students during this vulnerable time. It's essential to assess population stress levels and psychosocial adjustments to help support mechanisms for dealing with college students and their futures. For future work, we could focus more on understanding relationships between certain coping mechanisms and stressors, but for a more in-depth study we would need to further examine mental health and well-being in later phases of the pandemic to truly grasp and bring forth solutions to this general problem.

CONCLUSION

IN CONCLUSION, MY RESEARCH conveys and exposes a pure correlation between social anxiety increase among college students and the onset of COVID-19. Internal and external factors induced from the pandemic have brought forth negative impacts on students' mental health. Through qualitative and quantitative methods, there is proof in findings that there is increased stress and anxiety for college students since the COVID outbreak. Stitching together multiple factors from college students' lives reveals that the pandemic has added a load of hardship to student' success in their academic careers and states of being. It is important that, as this data suggests, we find ways in which we can limit and reduce such stress and anxiety on students in general. Knowing this is a problem many face all around the world, it is only fitting that we understand this is an issue that

requires a solution for the benefit and betterment of college students. ▶▶

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