

Saudi Female Student Experiences with Emergency Remote Teaching During the Covid-19 Pandemic – A narrative Approach

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Abstract

The world has been reeling from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on many levels. Beginning in March 2020, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia closed its academic doors. Overnight educators and students transitioned to online *Emergency Remote Teaching* (ERT). This paper will investigate how female students from a private university in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia experienced online instruction. Two-hundred and sixty-two students were contacted online to reflect on their experiences with ERT. Using thematic analysis, three categories of student responses emerged from student survey reflections: 1. lack of motivation and focus, 2. comprehension and issues with autonomous learning, 3. university as a social experience. We concluded that students were experiencing the pandemic and online education as a very stressful and unsettling period. Online classes were perceived as mostly negative learning experience. Furthermore, students reported psychological, emotional, and social problems caused by lockdowns, social distancing restrictions and the prolonged period of ERT.

Keywords: Covid-19, Saudi Arabia, Emergency Online Teaching, Female University Students, Pandemic.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 virus has caused an unprecedented disruption to humanity exposing earth's vulnerability in ways never experienced or anticipated. Governments, institutions, and individuals from around the globe implemented strategies, some shared, others localized, to combat the spreading of the deadly virus. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the focus of this paper, reacted swiftly and dramatically by closing and/or limiting access to international borders, shopping centres, recreational facilities, and religious events including Hajj and Umrah. For weeks, months and even during the following year, diverse strategies were deployed to combat the evil pathogen including social distancing, mandatory face coverings, curfews, and a five-day nationwide lockdown. Curfews and lockdowns continue to be applied to specific cities and neighbourhoods experiencing flareups (Aamir & Winkel, 2021; Awaji, 2020; Ebrahim & Memish, 2020).

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Globally, the education sector responded by closing its doors to all forms of person-to-person education. According to UNESCO, approximately 1.6 billion students have been affected worldwide by these closures (May 28, 2020). In March 2020, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education (MOE) announced the closure of all its schools and universities to prevent the spreading of the virus. Overnight, classrooms and teachers transitioned to online instruction now recognized as *Emergency Remote Teaching* (ERT) (Hodges et al, 2020, p. 3). Educators who had little or no prior experience with online instruction, a specialized form of education, were obliged to hold classes virtually. The immediacy of the transition combined with the duration of almost 2 years has profoundly affected students, their families, and educators in unanticipated ways. The repercussions have surpassed inadequate internet access, limited computer availability, and enforced isolation through to include a wider array of physical and/or psychological symptomologies as will be demonstrated in this paper.

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, scholars from around the world have conducted research to understand the complex nature of the virus and its wide spreading impact. Some investigations focused on the physical, social, and emotional effects on students (Baloran, 2020; Son et al. 2020; Elmer, Mepham, & Stadtfeld, 2020; Copeland et al., 2021; Winkel, McNally, & Aamir, 2021) while others explored the psychological consequences of the pandemic on young adult students (Baloran, 2020; Cao, 2020; Konstantopoulou & Raikou, 2020; Sahu, 2020). There is a growing body of researchers who are interested in ERT and its effects on students (Teng, Wu, 2021; Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

Only a few studies have focusses on how the pandemic and the sudden shift to online classes has affected female students (Winkel, McNally, & Aamir, 2001). Large, multinational studies have pointed out that the pandemic had negatively impacted women in many ways. Women -especially mothers – have reported increased stress and pressure due to spending more time on childcare and household chores while working remotely (Giurge et al., 2021). For female university student's studies have shown that they experienced higher levels of social isolation, mental health problems and academic issues (Prowse et al., 2021, Rodriguez-Besteiro et al., 2021). To address this gap, we conducted a study among female students at a small private university in Saudi Arabia. This paper will examine how female students responded to ERT during the Covid-19 pandemic and how it impacted them academically, socially and mentally.

The paper will begin with a review of ERT followed by a discussion related to qualitative research methods a thematic analysis. Three main themes identified from the student reflections will be reviewed next: 1. lack of motivation and focus, 2. comprehension and issues with autonomous learning, and 3. university as a social experience. All student commentaries are verbatim responses. They have not been altered. Student commentaries support each of the themes and the overall perspective that online education during Covid-19 has had unanticipated effects on students' learning and their overall health.

Literature Review:

Online and Emergency Remote Teaching in GCC countries

Online teaching has been practised at some Saudi universities since the early 2000s. King Fahd University in Dharahn, for example, has designed e-learning courses in cooperation with a Canadian university to support face-to-face teaching and offer classes in hybrid mode (Hamdan, 2014). Since 2011, the Saudi Electronic University (SEU) has been the first university in the Kingdom to offer exclusively online courses to enable students to study remotely (Alshathri, 2016). With currently 27000 students enrolled across the Kingdom, the SEU is offering undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as lifelong learning courses (SEU, 2021). In other Arab countries online university were established much earlier, for example the Virtual University of Tunis and the Syrian Virtual University in 2002 and a few years later in 2007 the Hamdan Bin Mohammad University in the United Arab Emirates (Sebaaly, 2018). Other conventional Arab universities are offering online programs or blended courses, most of them are limited to special programs that require only minimal face to face interaction (Sebaaly, 2018). In addition to online courses at

universities, Open Educational Resources (OER) exist in many Arab countries to support lifelong learning. In Saudi Arabia, there is a very popular OER repository called Shms, which is supported by a number of universities and offers several thousand courses. More OER are being provided by the Ministry of Education to provide more educational opportunities in the kingdom (Jemni & Khribi, 2017; Tlili et al., 2020).

The abrupt change from face to face teaching to online classes, which was completed in Saudi Arabia on 16 March 2020 to stop the spread of Covid-19, did not catch most universities unprepared. Online course management systems such as Blackboard are used by many institutions to deliver course material online, communicate with students electronically and conduct tests, quizzes and exams online. Although, there is a big difference in traditional online teaching and the sudden shift of face to face classes to online platforms. Traditional online teaching and Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) differ in structure, purpose, and targeted audiences. Traditional online courses were originally designed for students who could not attend traditional classrooms due to other obligations such as childcare, work, or disabilities (Kidman & Chang, 2020). These courses are meant to be delivered with the aid of the internet and other technological support to encourage independent learning and maintain a learner-teacher relationship based on differing times and places (Shin & Hickey, 2020). Attendance and participation are monitored and demanded by the instructor and the institution.

The term *Emergency Remote Teaching* was first introduced to a wider audience in 2020 to differentiate between traditional online classes and the face-to-face teaching that occurred before the response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Hodges et al. 2020, p. 3):

A temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances [which] involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated.

In essence, ERT is regular teaching using the internet that has dramatically limited the instructor's ability to effectively supervise and regulate their online sessions. One of the main problem is to monitor attendance and participation making it one of the contributing factors for student alienation, as will be demonstrated.

Methodology

The main objective of this study was to understand how the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on their students' overall mental health, academic performance, and social life.

Due to imposed online teaching constraints, an online survey was conducted rather than interviewing students face to face. Online qualitative surveys provide convenience and comfort for the participants (Terry & Braun, 2017).

These benefits were not only advantageous during a pandemic, but also when conducting research in a conservative society such as KSA where sensitive, intimate topics may be difficult for some students to disclose one-on-one. Students with inhibitions may be prone to responding honestly without an audience. In terms of language proficiency, most of the participants are second language speakers with a good command of the English language, therefore the survey was conducted in English.

The survey was accessible only to female students attending at least one of the three instructors' courses during the Spring 2021 semester. The activity was not mandatory, although it was encouraged. Students did not receive any kind of compensation for participating.

Students electing to participate in the research received their survey via email or during their online session with the instructor. The survey requested students to reflect honestly about their ERT experiences and how online learning has affected their education in addition to any social, physical, or psychological responses they may have experienced.

A thematic analysis was implemented next adhering to the six-steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006):

- familiarization with the data
- generation of initial codes
- theme search, theme review
- theme definition and naming
- report production (redundant)

The reflections were analyzed using open coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). Similar codes were examined and clustered until three key themes were identified: 1. lack of motivation and focus, 2. comprehension and issues with autonomous learning, and 3. university as a social experience.

Sampling Strategy

Two hundred and sixty-two undergraduate female students from five different colleges including the College of Engineering (COE), College of Computer Engineering and Science, College of Business Administration, College of Architecture and Design, and the College of Sciences and Human Studies (CSHS) participated in the study. The students' average age was between 20-24 (49.5%) with 58.8% freshman, 23.3% sophomores, 12.8% juniors, and 5.1% senior students (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participants of the Study

Gender	Female	100% (N= 262)
Age	Younger than 20	46%
	Between 20-24	49.4%
	Older than 24	4.5%
Academic Year	Freshman	58.8%
	Sophomore	23.3%
	Junior	12.8%
	Senior	5.1%
Major	Interior Design	11.4%
	HR	8.4%
	Architecture	9.4%
	Graphic Design	3.9%
	Electrical Engineering	3.6%
	Mechanical Engineering	2.3%
	Civil Engineering	2.6%
	Information Technology	2.6%
	Computer Science	5.8%
	Computer Engineering	5.2%
	Software Engineering	9.7%
	Accounting	1.9%
	Finance	19.5%
	Law	8.4%
MIS	5.2%	

Data Collection:

Findings

For this study, students were asked via google forms about their experiences with online teaching. The first part of the survey collected demographic information from the study participants. The second part asked about the students' experiences. For this, the study participants were asked to write a reflection of at least 500 words about their personal experience and feelings towards online classes during the lockdown. After data collection, the data was extracted from Google forms and anonymised. A thematic analysis was then carried out.

In the following the three identified main themes are going to be analysed.

Table 2: Theme of Participants Reflections (N= 262)¹

Theme	No. of Observation
Struggle with Focus	79
Social Isolation	66
Technical Problems	30
Comprehension Issues	50
Lack of Accountability	23
Increased Workload	22
Concerns about quality of education	10

1. Lack of Motivation and Focus

Student reflections showcased a broad range of issues stemming from online education. Lack of motivation was one of the key responses. This is in accordance with other ERT scholars who identified lack of motivation by students, problems focusing during online classes, and losing motivation to participate or interact in class as principal responses to ERT (Teng & Wu, 2021). Many students acknowledged that while their instructors made a concerted effort to provide engaging and interesting lectures, they felt disconnected because of online teaching in general. Rapanta (2020) suggests that students in online classes are required to be more autonomous when reading and comprehending the material. This supports claims that online lectures are based more on material than on direct teacher-student or student-student interaction.

Losing motivation and feeling less productive were identified by numerous students as explanations for their deteriorating psychological state and academic capabilities. The following quote of one of the participants highlights this problem:

Furthermore, as a student studying at home can be a little tough, since there is no interaction by that I mean socializing with the teacher or students it can get boring and lonely where I find no motivation to study.

¹ Number of themes does not add up to total number of participants because in some interviews multiple themes were mentioned.

Many commented that they were “bad” at self-learning or explained that they lacked the discipline and incentive to work on their own. The following student excerpt highlights how one student recognized that her motivation was waning and causing harm to her academic proficiency:

This online learning has affected me personally because I found myself turning in late assignments. It was not because I had issues, it was because I did not have the motivation and energy to do them.

While lack of motivation can be attributed to a less engaging and interactive learning environment, many students also reported signs of depression and a general sense of lethargy. Some of the commentaries supported signs associated with mental illness such as in the following case:

I have problems sleeping at night, I can't focus anymore in class sometimes I fall asleep during it and I feel guilty about it. Some instructors would think I don't love attending their classes but it's quite the opposite, the problem is just that I cannot fix my sleeping schedule and have no pressure to wake up in the morning to go to university, so I oversleep and stay in bed.

Several students were able to be more specific identifying their feelings of isolation with their inability to comprehend lectures and course material. This was emphasized by one student, who identified several significant contributors for her general malaise:

Also, online school was a big struggle at first, being afraid of the uncertain internet connection, not knowing how to ask for help and being afraid of missing important information because the instructor's voice was not clear made me lose interest. Another negative influence was losing motivation. During lockdown life seemed kind of bland which made me lose all motivation to move out of bed.

Her commentary supports the findings from various studies highlighting curfews, lockdowns, and a general lack of social contact as contributing factors to high rates of depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts (Sahu, 2020). This was highlighted by another student:

Mentally, having a lack of real social interaction and communication with friends and family can be mentally draining and cause a lack of productivity and motivation. I have actually experienced that due to not being able to interact with others, as I became less motivated and driven to complete my tasks and assignments.

Lack of accountability or not “taking it seriously” were also reported by many participants. Most students mentioned that they tried to stay attentive, but lost interest after a few weeks or did not try at all as this survey excerpt highlights:

I had to have a problem studying from online classes since I couldn't focus because sometimes I would get bored after that I couldn't manage my time between my online school and my life because I thought online school was like just any other game, I couldn't take it seriously.

Several studies have noted that student enjoyment is essential for academic success, motivation, and retention in online classes (Okada & Sheehy, 2020). This was an important issue for the students who participated in this project. Many reported that online teaching was not 'fun'. Their responses suggest that it was boring and not very interactive:

For my own experience with these online classes it was the worst ever, because basically it is hard to keep focus in it. Moreover, there is no emotions, vibes. No one can ignore this people should see each other that

is going to help a lot to know people, even to know how they think seeing people sit and talk with them helps a lot to understand. I have a lot of things to do, but what if these classes were face to face classes I'll be able to see people to talk. I swear it is getting worse and worse.

2. Comprehension issues

According to the survey findings, autonomous learning was extremely difficult for many of the participants. ERT classes tend to be more student-centred than traditional online classes. Instructors focus more on the facilitation of the course content and material while students are required to take charge of their own learning process (Rapanta et al., 2020). Many students commented on this paradox attributing it to their lack of motivation, sleeping problems, and general disconnect from their own learning. The following excerpt showcases one student's frustration at self-learning, staying alert, and isolation:

First my horrible sleeping difficulties due to facing screens all over the time. Also, I think that I do have a serious problem with staying focus in online classes and don't always understand what the instructor means, just in the opposite of regular classes, because there are no motivations to stay focus maybe. In addition, I think that staying home and not meeting my classmates means lots of lost fun.

I am at home taking online classes that requires much more effort. I have to study and explain everything to myself. the online method is not helpful at all. I thought it would be easier to learn from home and take my exams in home. One month later, I find out that I'm not benefiting in any point. I woke 5 minutes before the classes and that's keeping me sleepy along the class. I get bored from sitting in-front of my laptop and then do my assignment using the same tool.

Online classes requiring self-directed learning an essential skillset focusing on time management skills, note taking, and reading. The analysis revealed that many students stated that they were not prepared to engage at this level. Student survey findings highlighted many participants' inability to regulate their self-directed studies attributing to their self-deprecating commentaries.

With a prolonged lack of social interaction, not having direct contact with the teacher and classmates was perceived negatively by many participants affecting their learning experience overall. The students' inability to meet with people contributed to intense feelings of isolation removing them from the learning process:

In the other hand, I do not prefer studying online, because I do not meet people face to face, nor sometimes I do not even listen to their narration. I do not like this at all, because I interact with the person according to his expressions and tone of voice more than I talk to him in writing. I am bad at creating written conversations. Especially if it is something formal such as studying or explaining a topic to the person who is reading. So, in the end, I don't prefer online classes for these reasons.

Despite the hesitancy of some students to use online video cameras due to conservative viewpoints, many students reported that the lack of nonverbal communication such as eye contact and gestures made it difficult for them to follow the lessons or to understand what was being said. Small gestures, which were never given much weight in class, are now missing to make contact or to emphasise what is being said (Villar, 2020). One student is highlighting why the lack of body language makes it more difficult for her to follow the class:

In my opinion online class is really difficult because I understand much better when I

am in the classroom. For example, last semester I had a math subject and for math you need to understand each equation, so I was having a problem to understand without seeing the teacher explain it on the board.

2. University as social experience

The social dimension of learning on campus in shared spaces such as classrooms, lecture halls, cafeterias, and libraries cannot be overstated. Interacting with other students and instructors on campus is important (Cox 2011). It is a significant part of university life and the student's overall social learning. The pandemic altered the social experience especially for first year entries. They did not have the experience of their freshman year in a similar manner as more advanced students who had at least a semester or two to acclimate to university life had prior to the shutdowns.

For students who entered university during the pandemic closures, they began their post-secondary studies without the physical, emotional, and psychological experience of physically belonging to a cohort. The pandemic closures have robbed them and more senior students of the social interactions that are innate to the university learning process. Many students expressed that they missed the social environment and the interaction with instructors and classmates:

I started my first year of university at home due to the pandemic, this made me feel miserable and lost a lot of joy of being a college student. I always imagined my first day in freshman year would be full of excitement and joy with classmates and campus activities. Sadly, this has affected me negatively in not building social relationship with friends. It also, made me feel unrecognized since all communication between me in my professor's is by texting instead of communicating orally as I wanted to.

For those students who enrolled during the pandemic and have experienced university education only through online classes, the culmination of many factors contributed to their lack of motivation and psychological responses:

I feel very, very disappointed because as a freshman student at university it's a very different experience and doesn't feel like am actually at university and doesn't give you the experience that every student should have, because even the last semester of school was online too but we can't change the circumstances that we are in currently in because it's out of our control and hand, I didn't like the experience at all. I honestly feel like I am not getting enough sleep, no experience and no quality education. I personally can't learn online and can't study online it destroyed me mentally in so many different ways.

For others, the transition from high school to university represents an important milestone for young people. It often facilitates moving out of the natal home, making new friends, and experiencing a less regulated and structured learning environment. In Saudi Arabia, elementary and high schools are often highly structured with strict dress codes and monitoring of make-up, hairstyles, etc. For many females, attending university means that they will experience more freedom and socializing in a more relaxed environment. ERT temporarily blocked these experiences having serious implications for learning as expressed in the following passage:

For me personally the hardest time during the pandemic was when we were under lockdown. The idea of not known when everything is going back to normal was devastating. Especially because it was my first year in university, I went to the campus for 2 months only. I did not get to meet new people, present in front of my classmates, and I could not have the normal experience that I always wanted.

Feelings of having missed out or having been deprived of something were clear. Graduation ceremonies for young people mark the end of one stage of life and the beginning of a new one. This rite of passage has been dramatically affected by the pandemic closures. Many graduating students expressed feeling deprived of the formal recognition by the university, their peers, and family upon the completion of their degree requirements. The depth of loss and transition were highlighted by one student whose dream will never become a reality:

Since I was a little girl I've always dreamt of graduating from high school and having a big graduation party. But unfortunately, all of that didn't happen. My first year of university was also online. Everything was blending in together, high school, university everything felt the same. All of this affected my mental health. Sometimes I would be demotivated to study and would be sad.

Discussion

The findings from the surveys reflect an overall aversion to online teaching resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. The students' reflections showcase an array of social, psychological, and emotional responses to ERT. Findings from the thematic analysis revealed that many students struggled with psychological and emotional problems during the lockdown that effected their mental well-being as well as their capacity to study online (Sahu, 2020). Most students reported a lack of focus and motivation regarding their online education. The students listed a number of reasons for their motivational issues. These included lack of self-discipline, lack of interaction with classmates and professors, sleeping problems and a general feeling of dejection and isolation. Many students stated that they lacked the skills to successfully participate in online classes. These included time management, note-taking, reading and listening skills and self-discipline. Research has shown that online classes are more student focussed and require students to take charge of their learning process (Rapanta et al., 2020).

Schools are not just physical places where people gather to attend classes, but are also important social hubs of interaction, connection, and collaboration (Shin & Hickey, 2020, p. 10). This was confirmed by the participants. In addition, it is especially prudent to acknowledge that Saudi Arabians have historically lived in gender segregated spaces despite recent changes. Typically, women in the kingdom gather at home or in urban settings such as in coffee shops or restaurants with other females or male family members. In this regard, institutions of higher learning offer segregated social spaces for female only interactions. These places are less restricted and provide safety for the female student. For example, in a private university where this study was conducted, women are not required to wear the traditional *abaya* (outer covering), *niqab* (veil) or *hijab* (headscarf), making it possible for the female students to express themselves more freely than in a public place like a coffee shop where strange men may also be visiting. This is an important consideration for students' professional growth and development whereby the female campus becomes a safe learning environment where students and families can feel protected and respected.

The overall impact of ERT to date has been complex, heart-breaking, and life altering for the students. It will be some time before the true outcome is known. Based on this investigation, it is safe to say that students have suffered in unanticipated ways. Their ability to think critically in combination with a lack of social stimulation has been compromised. Their views about themselves, their futures, and their losses have been dramatically altered. Many students noted that they are looking forward to the resumption of campus instruction. It will take time to move beyond this experience.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to find out how the participants experienced online emergency teaching during the pandemic and what the main struggles were. The narrative data was rich, informative and provided us insight into very personal experiences but also shed light on overarching problems that were shared by most participants of this study.

The data has shown that the pandemic and the lockdown of public life was experienced as a disturbing, unsettling and stressful period of time. Depressive thoughts, mood swings, lack of motivation and a negative outlook on life were very common. While most students welcomed the decision of the government to switch from in class education to online classes in order to stop the spread of the virus, a majority expressed a dislike for online education. The participants clearly stated that they were not pleased with the overall ERT experience. Many stated that they have suffered socially, emotionally, and psychologically. Teachers, administrators, and policymakers should pay closer attention to the social, emotional, psychological, and physiological consequences of lockdown and online classes. During the lockdown in Saudi Arabia, psychological support was provided via mobile therapy applications, but it is unclear how widely these services were used or known (Winkel et al., 2021). The study showed that a long period of online-only classes has far-reaching effects on students, affecting not only their academic performance but also social relationships and mental health. This needs to be taken into account when designing and delivering online classes. For example, we should consider how to prevent students from becoming demotivated and feeling socially isolated in the event of another lockdown. It is important to work together with different sectors of the education system to make online classes more interactive and socially inclusive.

Our data indicates that students had problems with the online environment that resulted in a lack of motivation, comprehension issues and an overall feeling of social isolation. Online teaching was predominantly given negative attributes by the participants. The lessons were perceived as boring, difficult to understand and monotonous. The lack of contact and exchange with professors and classmates was emphasised particularly frequently, as was the loss of the university as a place for social interaction. The limitations of this study are primarily due to the social distancing and lockdown measures in Saudi Arabia during data collection. We were not able to conduct face-to-face interviews with the participants but could only conduct the data collection online. Furthermore, no male students could be interviewed, as the authors of the studies only teach female students. Another limitation is the small number of study participants, who are all located in the Eastern Region in Saudi Arabia. For future studies, it would be appropriate to extend the study area to other provinces of the country and to include male students. Despite these limitations, this study can provide valuable information on students' experiences with ERT during the Covid-19 lockdown. It is of interest to teachers as well as social workers, advisors and policy makers in higher education.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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