Identifying Strategies Used by Students to Manage their Emotions during Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus disease outbreak has disrupted the global economy on an unprecedented scale and speed and forced universities worldwide to abruptly adopt online teaching and learning. Although the concept of online learning is not new and that some universities possess the infrastructure to embrace online learning, many universities across the globe especially those in rural areas were largely unprepared to adapt to the new situation. Due to lack of preparation and many still being accustomed to traditional learning practices, the transition to online learning has taken an emotional toll not only on academics but also on their students. The present study aimed to understand the strategies students use to manage their emotions when engaged in online learning.

Utilising a qualitative research method, we recruited 20 undergraduate students studying at a public university in Malaysia using the purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online. Thematic analysis revealed that some students experience fear, anger, and sorrow during online learning. These 'difficult' emotions can force the students to develop feelings of alienation and isolation and thus feel emotionally disconnected from their coursemates and lecturers. This is particularly due to the absence of in-person interactions compared to conventional face-to-face lectures. Furthermore, we found that the lack of verbal and non-verbal cues can cause students to lose motivation in learning. The findings of this study are expected to help academics and universities understand ways students cope with online learning and the need for their peers to help improve the students' emotions.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating that students experience both positive and negative emotions during
online learning. Negative emotions can become a barrier to online learning. Students often deal with their negative emotions by relying on their peers to help improve their own emotions.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic which had spread across the world by early 2020, had produced a series of devastating effects not only on the global economy but also on society (Coppola et al., 2021). The pandemic forced many to experience discomfort, stress and fear due to situations such as loneliness, isolation or conflicts at home (Coppola et al., 2021). Also, it had forced universities across the globe to shift from traditional teaching methods to online teaching to fill the academic gap that has been created by the pandemic due to the closure of learning institutions (e.g., schools, universities) (Fawaz & Samaha, 2020). Online learning is not new. It has been around for many years. Online learning can provide flexibility to learning for both the instructors and learners (Chirikov et al., 2020). But online learning also comes with many challenges to educators and students such as a lack of infrastructure especially in developing countries (Anderson, 2011; Kamal et al., 2020; Mallinson & Krull, 2013; Nambiar, 2020). In a study conducted by Gallagher-Lepak et al. (2009), they suggested that developing new pedagogies for teaching in the virtual classroom is vital. Furthermore, they stressed the importance of understanding the uniqueness of online learning environments (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, the world experienced a sudden growth in the number of online teaching and learning. Atsani (2020) indicated that transitioning from traditional learning to the online method is not easy and simple as the virtual classroom is different from the traditional classroom (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009). Furthermore, many learning institutions are struggling to face the challenges of online learning as they are not prepared to quickly transition from conventional learning to online learning (Giatman et al., 2020). This is mainly due to the need for proper information technology infrastructures (Azmi & Rukun, 2020). Various teaching and learning tools such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams had to be deployed to ease online learning (Kamal et al., 2020). Furthermore, in a recent study conducted by Putra and Giatman (2020), they found that 94.4% of students preferred face-to-face lectures over online.

One of the issues faced by academics around the world is to recognise and see how their students engage in online learning (Sabri et al., 2020). Online learning is known to be less emotional and more impersonal (Rice & Love, 1987) and lack emotional richness such as facial expressions and gestures compared to face-to-face learning (Vrasidas & Zembylas, 2003). According to Sabri et al. (2020), they indicated that students’ emotions such as self-esteem, inspiration, and dedication cannot be overlooked as they are considered determinants of student success. Furthermore, early literature had warned on the negative influence of pandemics on students’ psychological well-being (Mosley et al., 1994). Available studies have looked at the emotions involved in online learning (Zembylas, 2008). For instance, in a study conducted by Zembylas (2008), they found that men and women express different emotions during online learning. Despite a growing interest in online learning, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding why students manage their emotions and how they do it. It is crucial to explore the current situations and issues with online learning to provide a better context.
for ways in which the student experience in online learning might be improved. Also, it will allow learning institutions to understand and thus provide positive emotional scaffolding when students are facing significant social and emotional challenges.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Online Learning

As previously mentioned, online learning has been around for several years especially in developed countries such as the United States (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Parsad & Lewis, 2008). One of the earlier benefits of online learning is that it affords more opportunities for students at risk or students who are unable to attend class due to health reasons (Lee & Tettegah, 2016). Also, non-native speakers would have more time to think about, plan out, and respond to other students compared to physical classes (Lee & Tettegah, 2016). Furthermore, online learning allows learning institutions to have participants from different geographical regions (Lee & Tettegah, 2016). However, the COVID-19 pandemic that swept the globe forced learning institutions across the world to quickly adopt fully online teaching and learning. This led to educators facing many challenges especially in adapting to online teaching, supporting and communicating with their students (König, Jäger-Biela & Glutsch, 2020). In addition, educators had hardly any preparation time and the lack of experience in shifting to online teaching caused many educators to suffer from technology stress (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021; Reinhold et al., 2021). According to Restauri et al. (2001), proper functioning technology is required for online learning as it may hinder a student's learning and engagement. Also, online teaching and learning are more time consuming for educators compared to traditional learning (Restauri et al., 2001).

In a study conducted by Fawaz and Samaha (2020), it found that the screen produces intense isolation that makes it challenging for many individuals to engage in back-and-forth conversation. The negative effects of prolonged exposure of technologies are that it can further impact the level of stress and anxiety among its users (Mheidly, Fares & Fares, 2020). In a study conducted by Višnjić et al. (2018) they found that the intense use of smart devices (i.e., mobile phones) can influence university students’ mental health. Students can experience depression, anxiety, and stress (Visnjic et al., 2018). According to Damasio (2001), learning is not only a cognitive but also a highly social and emotional process. Within the technologies used for learning, users express their emotions (Tettegah & McCreery, 2016). Despite the benefits of technologies for learning, these technologies especially new ones can be intrusive, frustrating, and unreasonably demanding of both time and money to its users (Cooper, 2016). Also, it can be disruptive to human interaction and learning (Cooper, 2016). Without the right tools, it can hinder rather than support interaction and learning (Cooper, 2016).

2.2. Emotions in the Classroom

Emotions have been described as a multiple-component process that comprises specific affective, cognitive, psychological, and behavioural elements (Pekrun et al., 2011; Scherer, 2009). Emotions help coordinate our thoughts and actions and help us respond to situations (Tee, 2021). Individuals may experience a wide range of emotional responses with family, friends, co-workers and even strangers (Roberts & Smith, 2002). Roberts and Smith (2002) suggested that it is common practice for individuals to manage their emotional responses according to the social context.
Emotions are omnipresent in an academic setting, and they can affect how students engage and perform in their studies (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). Emotions can influence a student’s academic achievement (Mega, Ronconi & De Beni, 2014). Also, emotions are important because they can either impede or motivate learning (Dirkx, 2001; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). For instance, positive emotional experiences play an important role in academic achievement and have a considerable impact on students’ ultimate success in the academic domain (Pekrun et al., 2009). Students’ enjoyment, hope, and pride relate positively to their academic achievement, whereas hopelessness relates negatively to achievement (Pekrun et al., 2011). Negative emotions such as anger, boredom, and isolation and positive emotions such as engagement and excitement experienced by online learners can hinder or support the process of learning (Alencar & Netto, 2020; Hara & Kling, 2000).

In traditional classrooms, teachers can identify affectivity through the expressions, dialogues, and behaviour of the students (Alencar & Netto, 2020). However, in distance courses, the situation becomes more challenging since the students’ emotions are registered in communication tools such as a forum, and chats (Mohammad, 2016). Tettegah and McCreery (2016) indicated that emotions that are experienced and expressed through technology include joy, anger, love, empathy, motivation, frustration, and hatred. In a study conducted by Mega, Ronconi and De Beni (2014), they found that students have been shown to experience a wide range of emotions in different academic settings, such as taking exams and attending classes. When it comes to Malaysian students, Yong (2010) indicated that they prefer to receive knowledge directly from their teacher and they rarely express their emotions openly. In a study conducted by Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012), they indicated that social interactions were more likely to evoke emotional responses.

In 2006, Pekrun (2006) suggested that when students positively value their learning materials, they will feel a sense of enjoyment. When activities lack any incentive value (positive or negative), negative emotions such as boredom will be induced (Pekrun, 2006). As suggested, the classroom is a site for emotion management, especially when the topics covered may expose the instructor’s and students’ sensitivities (Roberts & Smith, 2002). Also, online learning can induce emotional reactions and emotional experiences can affect a student’s learning (Swerdloff, 2016). Students especially those considered “digital natives” are different from other generations in terms of how they see, use, and relate to technology tools (Swerdloff, 2016, p. 158). In some situations, they can be more “emotionally connected” than others (Swerdloff, 2016, p. 158). By better understanding how emotional responses are socially mediated, instructors can manage the classroom and teach more effectively (Roberts & Smith, 2002).

Online learning can generate negative emotions such as anxiety and tension towards the students. Cooper (2016) suggested for educators to interact casually with their students as it can help reduce the students’ anxiety and tension thus opening the door for more students to come forward to ask difficult and challenging questions. He also indicated that by showing that the educator cares such as asking questions, “How are you?” “Are you ok?” can open up interpersonal dialogue and learning (Cooper, 2016). The breakdown of families and the lack of family and community social activities can also affect learning (Cooper, 2016). Cooper (2016) confirmed in his findings that positive emotion and empathy generated through human relationships are central to the learning process. Educators play an important role too to demonstrate their empathy to their students through the right facial expression, body language, and communication (Cooper,
2016). Also, educators need to respond in the best interests of the students they teach (Lewis et al., 2005).

2.3. Control-value Theory

The control-value theory is used in this study to examine how emotional experiences can affect a student’s achievements in an academic setting. This theory implies that prospective outcome emotions, retrospective outcome emotions, and activity emotions are determined by different appraisal antecedents (Pekrun, 2006). In other words, the unique combination of students’ control and value appraisals predicts their emotions (Pekrun, 2006). In turn, students’ emotions predict their motivation, learning strategies, and cognitive resources, which ultimately determine their academic achievement. This theory also suggested that whenever students are unable to control their environment, it would lead to confusion or frustration (Pekrun, 2006).

According to the control-value theory, achievement emotions are discrete emotions experienced by students during specific or achievement-related activities (Artino, Holmboe, & Durning, 2012). For instance, a student may associate anxiety or enjoyment with studying for and passing a particularly difficult exam. Meanwhile, another student may associate boredom, or hopelessness with studying for and failing the same exam. Within this theory, Pekrun (2006) stressed that positive and negative achievement emotions are proximally determined by students’ cognitive appraisals of the learning environment and the context of the material being learned. Furthermore, the emotional effects could be caused by other factors such as students’ effort, and persistence (Pekrun et al., 2002). In this case, students’ learning within the online learning environment.

3. Methodology

Utilising a qualitative research method, the researchers recruited 20 undergraduate students studying at a public university in the state of Selangor in Malaysia (see Table 1 for participant background). The participants were selected using the purposive sampling technique by relying on the researchers’ personal networks and also, the snowball (referral process). The method was used to limit to a small number of potential respondents (Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants were given a token for their participation in the study. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions about the study ahead of data collection and written informed consent was obtained.

Table 1: Background of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year of study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Final year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Second year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Second year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Second year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Second year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Final year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Final year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Final year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Second year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Second year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Second year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Final year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant 13  Female  26  Final year  
Participant 14  Female  24  Second year  
Participant 15  Male  23  Second year  
Participant 16  Female  25  Final year  
Participant 17  Male  24  Second year  
Participant 18  Male  24  Second year  
Participant 19  Female  25  Final year  
Participant 20  Male  23  Second year  

The interviews were all held at the end of May 2021. Each one-to-one semi-structured interviews lasted between 35 to 45 minutes and was at the convenience of the students. The interview schedule included open-ended questions and probes relating to the research question and applied flexibly throughout to allow the interviewer and interviewees to explore points of interest naturally as they occurred (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). To build rapport, each interview began with questions broadly relating to the interviewees’ background and experiences with online learning before questions related to how they manage their emotions were broached. Some of the questions asked are: “tell us a little bit about yourself?”, “do you enjoy online learning?”, “what do you do to keep yourself engaged in online learning?” “How do you normally feel when attending online lectures?”

The full interview schedule is available upon request from the researchers. The participants were given the option to withdraw if they felt uncomfortable at any point of the interview and results were also made available to the participants to ensure that the researchers had captured their perceptions accurately. The interviews were recorded using Google Meet and Zoom’s recording feature and transcribed verbatim. All identifiable information was anonymised, and participants allocated pseudonyms (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3).

Following transcription, the data was analysed in NVivo using Thematic Analysis (TA). TA is a method of “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). TA was used to search for overall themes using the phenomenological approach. The interview materials were structured using codes. The analytical process consisted of two phases:

Phase 1 In the initial phase, the transcripts were read a few times, and all text passages were cut into small sections according to content. All those sections were coded individually and put into preliminary categories that represented shared properties.

Phase 2 involves refining the codes to distinguish between the perceptions of students concerning why and how they manage their emotions. Thematic analysis identified three overarching themes concerning the students’ methods of managing their own emotions. These were: (i) social support as motivation for learning online, (ii) religiosity to improve their emotions, and (iii) recreational activities as a source of comfort (see Table 2).

4. Result and Discussion

The present study aimed to understand the strategies students use to manage their emotions when engaged in online learning. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted online. In this section, the researchers describe their findings and discuss the variation of students’ methods to manage their emotions. The
citations of students’ quotes have been placed in parentheses and their identities have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Analyses revealed that some students experience fear, anger, and sorrow during online learning. These ‘difficult’ emotions can force the students to develop feelings of alienation and isolation and thus feel emotionally disconnected from their coursemates and lecturers. This is particularly due to the absence of in-person interactions compared to conventional face-to-face lectures. Furthermore, we found that the lack of verbal and non-verbal cues can cause students to lose motivation in learning. Findings also suggest that students rely on social support from their lecturers, parents, and friends to help improve their emotions and get them engaged in online learning. Students also turn to their social media to alleviate ‘social loneliness’. The findings of this study are expected to help academics and universities understand ways students cope with online learning and the need for their peers to help improve the students’ emotions. Several recommendations informed by the participants’ feedback are offered to assist academics, universities, and policymakers improve future online learning experiences.

As presented in Table 2, several themes and sub-themes were identified pertaining to the strategies students use to manage their emotions, interestingly showing distinct ways of experiences and behaviours. These strategies were “social support”, “religiosity” and “recreational”, each discussed subsequently.

Table 2: Table of themes and sub-themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Social support</td>
<td>• Friends</td>
<td>This code is used when students talked about the support they seek when</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Family</td>
<td>managing their emotions such as friends, family, lecturers, and even</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lecturers</td>
<td>social media. Example: “I rely on my friends to cope with my feelings when</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Social media</td>
<td>it comes to online learning.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Religiosity</td>
<td></td>
<td>This code is used when the students talked about them performing prayers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to improve their emotions. Example: Other than what I had mentioned, prayers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>are the answer to everything.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Recreational activities</td>
<td></td>
<td>This code is used when the students talked about recreational activities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(e.g., jogging, gardening) that made them happy. Example: When I’m done with</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>my online class, I will go check on my plants. Just looking at my plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>make me at ease. Sometimes I re-pot them when it grows too big. Sometimes I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>talk to my plants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1. Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

Before presenting the strategies used by the student participants to manage their own emotions, the researchers will first present the findings on their perspectives toward online learning especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings show that students experienced a wide range of emotions such as fear, anger, happiness, and sadness throughout their online learning. Since the students selected are those from the second and final year, all of the participants had experienced at least one time of online learning during the previous semester. When asked whether they enjoy online learning, Participant 2 expressed:

I don't know whether I like it, or I hate it. It's quite confusing to be honest. The positive side about online learning is that I get to stay at home with my family and I don't really need to think about paying rent and travelling back and forth to my campus from my apartment. I guess the negative side especially COVID is making things worst is that I'm at home and my friends are at their home. Your interaction is limited to online. If your internet is bad, that's it. You can't attend your classes and you can't submit your work. And if your internet is not working, how are you going to study? So those kind of things I guess. I don't know. I no longer know what I feel right now.

Participant 8 who is a final year student replied to the question, “No I don’t enjoy it at all.” When asked to elaborate further, he replied in length:

Final year of studies is supposed to be a fun period because you’re at the very end of your degree life. You’ve created strong bonds with your classmates but now that we’re learning online, I can’t even meet them or lepak [hang out] with them. I can sense that next semester students will still learn online but I hope this pandemic ends cause it would be ashamed if my juniors didn’t get the chance to learn physically.

Participant 11 on the other hand reacted to the question with sadness:

Oh gosh, I don’t know where to start. I’m happy that online learning will keep us safe from this virus. But I’m so sad right now. Online learning is so so tough. I’ve cried multiple times because I just can’t handle it. My internet is so bad, my laptop keeps hanging and shutting down on its own. I want to rant but I’m just too tired.

The participants were also asked whether their lecturers had similar issues in terms of connectivity and equipment used for online learning. Participant 11 replied:

Yes, sometimes there are issues with Whatsapp or Google Meet and my lecturers struggle to do their classes. They end up postponing the class.

Another participant (Participant 12) replied in short “Yes they have similar issues like us. Sometimes they will text and say they have issues with their connections.” Also, Participant 19 responded with, “Not a fan of online learning. It’s very stressful due to my internet connection.” These findings are similar to what was presented in the literature...
review section. The lack of proper infrastructure for online learning such as the internet, and equipment (e.g., laptops) can disrupt online learning (Anderson, 2011; Azmi & Rukun, 2020).

4.2. Theme 1: Social support as motivation for online learning

For this code, the researchers divided it into sub-themes to illustrate the support sought or relied on by the participants. The sub-themes are “friends”, “family”, “lecturers”, and lastly “social media”.

4.2.1. Friends

When it came to managing support from friends, all of the participants agreed that their friends especially classmates can help them get through the whole semester of online learning. Many had admitted that online learning is tough and can be depressing but friends who understood what they were going through helped them feel positive about online learning and dealing with their thoughts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 3 for example had admitted:

I think I rely on my friends to keep me happy. I’m the only child so when my parents are busy working, I don’t really have anyone to talk to. And with the need to stay at home, it can make me feel overwhelmed. After a class, me and my classmates try to make time to speak to each other and catch up. I’ve never gotten the chance to get to know them long in person as our uni had to start remote learning as soon as the virus started spreading wildly. I hope it covid ends soon. I don’t want to spend the rest of my degree at home.

Participant 7 on the other hand indicated that the support of her friends makes her feel good and safe. She explained in brief:

I miss my friends. This pandemic is preventing us to meet each other. Otherwise, we would always hang out. We try to keep in touch with each other and have heart to heart sessions. Friends can keep you going through hard times.

Another participant (Participant 16) felt that friends help her cope with her feelings. She replied, “I rely on my friends to cope with my feelings when it comes to online learning.”

4.2.2. Family

Indeed, family especially parents play a fundamental role in supporting students’ online learning. The family environment plays an important role in including a student’s learning outcome (Rahmadian & Maksum, 2020). According to Setyawati and Subowo (2018), when the family environment is harmonious and fun, it will make their children feel motivated to learn. This is reflected in the findings whereby all of the participants had indicated that whenever their parents, as well as siblings, provide immense support towards their learning, it can motivate them to study hard. Participant 1 for instance explained:
My family and sisters are supportive. And I think that can help what you mentioned, improve my emotions and keep me going with online classes. They all understand my situation and understand how stressful online learning can be. But they always reassure me that things will be OK. Keep on learning and don’t give up.

Participant 4 who responded similarly said:

My daddy and mommy are always supportive of my studies. From diploma till now degree. Although they’ve never experienced online learning as they are both from a different generation but I’m thankful that they try. Some of my friends get upset and feel down whenever their parents don’t understand why they are always in their rooms. But again, I’m thankful my parents are so considerate and understanding. I guess that’s one of the factors that makes me feel positive. My supportive parents.

Meanwhile, Participant 6 had a different answer than the other participants. She had noted that most of the time her mother thinks that staying at home means that she could perform house chores as normal. In her own words:

My mama doesn’t understand the whole concept of online learning. She thinks I’m at home so I can do house chores, so I feel pressure every day. Sometimes when I have classes, she thinks I’m pretending that I’m online. So yes, having an understanding family will help the situation be better.

4.2.3. Lecturer

Many of the students in the sample made the point that they highly valued lecturers who were encouraging, positive, and present throughout their semester. Students claimed that lecturers play an important role when it comes to helping them regulate their emotions during online teaching and learning. They also felt that online learning prevented them to interact with their lecturers regularly and that online tools can cause communication breakdowns due to the absence of clear verbal and nonverbal communication. Also, they were hoping that their lecturers would be more ‘empathetic’ towards them. This is reflected in the study conducted by Cooper (2016). Cooper (2016) stressed the need for educators to understand their students and communicate casually with them. One example would be Participant 4. He felt that lecturers are ‘major figures’ when it comes to learning online. He said:

If you ask me, my lecturers are the major figures when it comes to online learning. If they don’t help us make sure that things are OK and that we are in the right direction, of course, all of us will feel panicky! So yeah, lecturers can ensure that we adjust well to online learning.

Participant 4 was asked to elaborate further about the role of his lecturers to make him feel ‘OK’. He then explained:

Well, I like it when my lecturer talks to us in a kind and ‘chill’ manner. There are lecturers who set a, I mean about three hours timeframe.
That’s when we can only reach him or her. And when we communicate with him or her, it always gets very serious. I mean, I don’t expect them to speak to their students as though we are their friends. But what I mean is more of, semi-formal?

Another student participant (Participant 5) said:

It’s tough to study online cause I don’t get to see well my lecturers’ body movements and gestures. Sometimes when the internet is so bad, things get cut off. Also, my friends tend to switch off their cameras. So online learning is very hard for me, and it makes me very nervous cause you’re basically on your own when it comes to learning. This is opposed to learning in class. At least you get to ask your lecturers questions. You can even ask your friends beside you if you don’t understand things. Gosh, I miss physical classes.

Participant 7 also replied:

I have this one particular lecturer who is super caring. She’s always texting my class asking how we are doing and whether we need any help whether in the form of advice or monetary. I think she’s the kindest lecturer I’ve come across and this sort of thing can make sure feel assured that things will be fine and that there are many people out there who care about you and understand that online learning is not easy.

4.2.4. Social media

Other than communicating with friends, family, and their lecturers, all of the students indicated that they relied on social media to feel good. Some had indicated that online learning can be overwhelming and that logging on to social media pages such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, can make them happy. To illustrate, Participants 4 and 6 both mentioned that when they are too tired from their online lectures, they would take a break and scroll through their Instagram. In Participant 4’s on words:

I follow lots of footballers and YouTubers on Instagram. Instagram is where I get my updates about them.

When asked to elaborate further on this, Participant 4 said:

I have an average of three classes every single day. It's tiring cause I don’t get to see my classmates in person. You want to talk to them, but they are far. If it’s physical lectures, at least during short breaks or before the lecturer comes in, you can at least speak to your friend and that’s one way that makes me happy. But now? I rely on my social media. Seeing the pictures makes me happy.

Participant 6 on the other hand replied in short, “TikTok and Twitter is the place where I turn to when I’m feeling low or just want to be happy. The funny videos that I watch can make me happy.” Another participant (Participant 7) had replied in length:
The pandemic can make all of us feel isolated. You can’t go out, you can’t meet your friends and family, you can’t socialise. So, the only way to not make me feel isolated is by going on social media. Social media can cure social isolation as you get to speak not to your contacts but also to other people. Students from all over the world are experiencing this and when we share things, they can relate. For example, when you talk about how tough online learning on Twitter, there’s bound to be someone who will respond to it and agree with my statement.

4.2.5. Religiosity

When reflecting on the strategies the participants had used to manage their emotions during online learning, many had indicated that to reduce stress, they would perform prayers. To illustrate, Participants 1, 4, 5, 8, 11, 12, 18, and 20 mentioned the power of prayers and dua. According to Participant 1, he indicated that when he feels overwhelmed with online learning, he would take a quick break and perform his daily prayers. He believes that praying can minimise his stress and make him feel calm. He added:

Online learning is not easy as it requires you to have a strong internet connection and on top of that, when your country is on lockdown, it makes things harder. I can’t meet my friends so it’s hard to discuss things compared to when I attend physical classes.

Participant 5 also believes in the power of prayers to manage her emotions. She replied briefly, “Other than what I had mentioned, prayers. Prayers are the answer to everything.” Apart from prayers, one of the participants (Participant 12) indicated that listening to Quran recitation makes her calm. She indicated that she has been doing so since she was in her teens. She elaborated:

When I listen to any Ustaz recite the Quran whether on YouTube or the radio, I feel at peace. It helped me become less nervous before sitting for any exams during high school. Now that I'm in university, I do the same. But not necessary when I have exams. Now that we have Covid, it makes me scared and hopeless. So, I listen to the recitations and sometimes I follow them too.

Although no studies to date have looked specifically at the role of religion in improving students’ emotions during online learning in the age of the pandemic, other studies have indicated that religion and spirituality can improve a person’s wellbeing. For instance, Coppola et al. (2021) had indicated that when people are experiencing a difficult situation, they will turn to spiritual activities to improve their well-being. Spiritual well-being is defined as a state that connects the mind and body of the individual, society, intelligence, and health, supporting the individual in his/her attitudes and life goals (Chou et al., 2016). Religiosity is a known coping strategy for mental illness, especially in stressful times (Prazeras et al., 2021). Also, spirituality seems to act positively in stressful situations (Coppola et al., 2021). Thus, religious and spiritual coping could help individuals adapt better to their life stress (Das et al., 2018).

4.2.6. Recreational activities
The researchers also found that the participants improve their emotions through recreational activities. Some of the activities they had mentioned include “jogging”, “brisk walking”, “gardening”, and “baking.” Participant 5 who had mentioned “gardening”, said:

When I’m done with my online class, I will go check on my plants. Just looking at my plants make me at ease. Sometimes I re-pot them when it grows too big. Sometimes I talk to my plants.

When asked further what kind of plants she has, Participant 5 replied, “roses and sunflowers”. Participant 12 on the other hand said:

Everyone knows gardening can be therapeutic. When my eyes get strained from looking at the screen for too long, I’ll head over to my garden and watch my plants and trees for a few minutes. I’ll make sure I’m not holding my phone or thinking about classes or assignments. I’ll just sit there for an average of 15 to 20 minutes. That’s all it takes to make me feel better but my other friends might have other suggestions.

Another participant (Participant 8) who mentioned jogging explained:

I live in a gated community, so I guess that’s one of the perks compared to my friends who live in apartments or flats. During my free time, I’ll go jogging around my area just to relax my mind. Of course, I feel sorry for my friends who are not able to do that. But that’s what I do.

Participant 10 who mentioned daily “brisk walking” said:

I do a lot of brisk walking cause it makes me feel calm. You don’t have to walk fast pace. I think many of my friends would agree with me that online learning drains your energy so brisk walking is one way that doesn’t really use up too much energy.

Other than that, Participants 6 and 7 both mentioned “baking” as one of their strategies to improve their emotions when overwhelmed with online learning. For instance, Participant 6 said:

I’ve been baking a lot ever since we started online learning and the whole lockdown in Malaysia. I do this when I don’t have any lectures. Some go for a jog, some shop online, what I do, I bake. Normally I bake cakes and cookies. I’ve started opening up orders to my family and friends for any special occasion. A few days ago, I baked a rainbow cake for my best friend and when she got it and told me how yummy it was, it made me feel good.

Participant 7 also indicated:

I love baking! I think that’s how I manage my emotions. The feeling of mixing all of the ingredients together and seeing it turn out well in the oven. I’m happy!
The findings are similar to what Ratcliffe and colleagues (2010) had found that is, environmentally friendly activities such as gardening can promote both students’ engagement and their achievement.

5. Conclusion

The present study revealed various concrete emotional experiences and emotion management strategies that undergraduate students used while going through online learning during the pandemic. It introduced an important concept regarding the way students feel about online learning, and how they cope with their emotions. The themes that were identified in this study show that students are facing a difficult time learning online during the pandemic due to the lack of support at home (e.g., parents), and social interactions. They try to adapt to the situation through various measures. Findings show that students seek social support (e.g., family and friends), turn to their religion (e.g., perform prayers), and also rely on recreational activities (e.g., brisk walking) to feel good regularly. The student participants mostly felt that they are alone, navigating their way through the semester. Lecturers and parents who are aware of the emotions within online learning and use strategies to effectively help their students or children, can also help improve the students’ learning. Although some have noted that they have supportive lecturers, many feel anxious and irritated, and this is partly due to the pandemic and also their issues with their internet and also other learning devices (e.g., laptop).

Before pointing to future research, a few limitations have to be noted. As is common, in qualitative research, the sample size of this research was relatively small. The findings were based on 20 participants’ views and perceptions and may not be sufficient to reflect the experiences of the whole population of students in Malaysia and elsewhere. Also, the participants were drawn only from a single university and who was available at the time. The limited sample size of this study should be supplemented for further research to confirm the generalisability of the findings by covering more participants and broader areas of Malaysia.

In terms of contributions, this study brings to light students’ reflections on how and why they manage their emotions during online learning. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many students struggled to learn due to social isolation and lack of support. Therefore, this study showed how students cope with these negative emotional experiences. The present study was also applied in the educational field, specifically in an online environment, capturing ways students adapt to a new learning environment. Furthermore, this study involves the reflections of students’ emotional display which can be considered a strength of this research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this study.

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