



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## Exploring the virtual learning landscape: Experiences and practices of social work students

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### Abstract

This study explores the nuanced experiences of Bachelor of Science in Social Work students at Wesleyan University - Philippines navigating the shift to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a phenomenological approach, the research delves into the participants' perceptions, challenges, coping strategies, and the transformative learning acquired amidst the transition to online education. The findings illuminate the diverse perspectives and adaptive mechanisms students employ, highlighting the importance of support systems, self-motivation, and the development of practical skills. Furthermore, the study sheds light on the mental health impacts and educational disparities exacerbated by the digital divide. The insights garnered underscore the critical need for enhanced academic counseling, IT support, and inclusive teaching strategies to mitigate the challenges of virtual learning and foster a conducive learning environment.

**Keywords:** Virtual Learning; Social Work Education; COVID-19; Digital Divide; Coping Strategies; Mental Health; Educational Disparities; Phenomenological Study; Online Education; Wesleyan University - Philippines

### 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically transformed the mode of teaching and learning from traditional face-to-face interaction to virtual learning in the higher education sector of virtually every school and university in the country. This shift represents a novel experience and practice for both teachers and students. Virtual distance learning has swiftly become a cornerstone of higher education (Oncu & Cakir, 2011). Many students and instructors found themselves unfamiliar with this mode of learning and teaching. Additionally, numerous facilities lacked the technological advancements required for this transition. Consequently, the academic community faced a significant challenge in educating future professionals under these new conditions. The pandemic caught the world unprepared, exposing various gaps and shortcomings within the education system (Cahapay, 2020). Given the unexpected nature of this shift, there remains a scarcity of research and programs aimed at addressing these sudden changes. The adaptation has been particularly challenging for students, partly because some teachers have yet to become proficient with the new technological tools, thus impacting the effectiveness of instruction. There is also a noted discrepancy in grading laboratory activities, performance tasks, and other activities that traditionally rely on physical classroom settings (Toquero, 2020). Inquiry-based learning, which depends on guidance, especially in its initial stages, faces similar challenges (De Villa & Manalo, 2020).

In higher education, distance learning introduces specific limitations, particularly for fields such as clinical medicine, veterinary studies, and other disciplines requiring access to laboratories and for creative areas like arts, music, and design. This limitation also applies to so-called soft skills—such as interpersonal skills, verbal communication, leadership, and initiative—which are crucial for employability and less effectively taught outside of face-to-face

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environments (Marinoni, et al.). Distance learning has prompted significant shifts in teaching methodologies. Boling et al. (2012) discovered that students in virtual learning environments greatly valued social exchanges and interactions, while instructors faced the challenge of rethinking their communication strategies to be more adaptable to students and their needs. In a study on student engagement, Holley and Oliver (2010) found that the circumstances disrupting students' lives could lead to their voices being lost in virtual learning environments.

Students have also adapted their coping mechanisms to meet new challenges, adjusting their perspectives, openness, motivation, lifestyle, time management, sense of responsibility, and priorities (De Villa & Manalo, 2020). The broader investigation, titled "Virtual Learning: Fresh Experiences and Practices of Social Work Students," aims to shed light on several key areas of student life under the shadow of virtual learning. The study poses critical questions intended to uncover the adjustments and challenges students face in this new learning landscape, the strategies they employ to manage school discussions and requirements, and the support systems they rely on. Moreover, it seeks to understand the realizations students have come to during this unprecedented period in education. Through addressing these questions, the study endeavors to paint a comprehensive picture of the virtual learning experience from the perspective of social work students navigating their education amid the pandemic.

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## 2. Literature Review

According to Thompson (2020), people considering a career in social work should develop an understanding what this profession requires of, its duties, roles, tasks, the pressure and the skills required to overcome it. People who choose to be involved in a helping profession should have clearer understanding on the responsibility they have in the nearer future. It is important for the teachers and schools to stress out right from the start the conception of what a social worker should be.

The pandemic forced students to adjust for the new normal. It brought difficult circumstances that required dramatic changes in the different sectors of the country, including the educational field since no one knows when exactly it will end. Marinoni, et. al. (2020) proved that it did not only affected Philippines but the globe as well. In their study, which studied the educational impacts of COVID 19 in five continents namely Africa, North and South America, Asia, and Europe, it was mentioned that almost all campus activities had stopped, and institutions completely closed. The educational sector was one of the most affected fields. The usual face-to-face classes will no longer be safe, but education still continued despite the situation. (De Villa & Manalo, 2020) Philippines declared temporary closure of educational institutions to prevent the spread of virus, and instead of the usual set-up when classes officially start on June, distance learning was conducted beginning August-October. Learners study at home through virtual classes, modules, and other alternative modes. Since the grading system will be changed, students must adjust to the new standard set to them. They will use new modes for evaluations, laboratory activities, and performances. Even the extra curriculums such as acquaintance gatherings, sports events, foundation and other special programs, and other contests were subject to discontinuation. (Tria, 2020) As education migrates to New Normal, learners make necessary adjustments to distance learning. The students also adjusted their coping mechanisms as they faced new challenges. These include their perspective, openness, motivation, lifestyle, time management, sense of responsibility, and priority. (De Villa & Manalo, 2020)

Since the new normal removed or lessen the option of having physical classes in the education system, students had to learn and comply to discussions and requirements using other methods. According to Tria (2020), UNESCO sited a number of learning resources such as virtual platforms, video lessons, and television broadcasts. He also mentioned that Commission on Higher Education (CHED) encouraged blended and/or virtual learning such as but not limited to Google Classroom, Messenger, Edmodo, Zoom, Facebook, and Youtube. This was further agreed by Ali (2020) as he mentioned the need of a more flexible and resilient education such as virtual or E-learning. To make this possible, students cope through confidence, readiness, motivation, and accessibility. Because of the flexibility of E-learning, learners were able to comply to their requirements in their own pace, place, and gadget. (Ray, 2020) Philippines also used this challenge an opportunity to focus on emerging technologies and empower evidence-based practices. (Toquero, 2020). In Bao's study (2020), he mentioned that to achieve effective virtual learning, the teachers must be able to deliver virtual instructional information clearly and completely. There must also be adequate support by faculty and teacher-assistants even in independent learning. Through these, there would be a big opportunity for students to participate to further broaden and deepen their understandings in the subject matters. Through virtual classes, students and their teacher exchange information that help them learn better. However, Cahapay (2020) mentioned in his study that learners also cope through group work and cooperative learning with proper social distancing and adherence to health protocols, although interactions are limited and reduced. These are some of their ways when they become less active during their teachers' direct instructions, lectures, and demonstrations. This was due to higher education's different approaches to continue the school year (Crawford, et. al., 2020), and the unpreparedness in the total shift to virtual

learning. (Marinoni, et. al., 2020). Marinoni, et. al. (2020), on the other hand), found out that learners also collaborate with each other through virtual platforms as alternative to physical meetups. This would be more possible if students feel a sense of belongingness despite the distance from each other. They did this through “chatbox” to interact through messages, images, voice recordings, and videos. They also used video-based learning to see each other face to face.

The integration of virtual learning methods presents an opportunity to make education more inclusive by providing marginalized populations with access to learning opportunities they might otherwise miss (Blessinger & Anchan, 2015; Bhatti, Tubaisahat, & El-Qawasmeh, 2005). However, disparities in internet access and digital literacy among these populations, often referred to as a lack of “digital capital,” pose a significant barrier to accessing virtual educational resources, contributing to social exclusion (Seale, Georgeson, Mamas, & Swain, 2015; de Haan, 1998). This issue is particularly pronounced in the Philippines, where low internet connectivity and average speeds of just 26.18 Mbps place the country at a disadvantage, affecting both learners' and teachers' ability to engage effectively in E-learning (Tria, 2020; De Villa & Manalo, 2020).

Similar challenges are evident in Bangladesh, where the virtual education system struggles due to poor network speeds, a lack of technological experience among teachers and students, and socio-economic barriers (Mahmud, et al., 2021). The digital divide extends beyond connectivity, affecting learners' confidence and ability to participate fully in digital learning environments due to insufficient skills and knowledge in digital tools and ICT (De Villa & Manalo, 2020). Financial constraints further exacerbate this issue, limiting access to necessary technology for both students and educators, and contributing to poorly resourced institutions (Crawford, et al., 2020; Ghawail, et al., 2021).

In China, the challenge extends to the need for high-quality platforms that cater to personalized educational needs, highlighting the importance of self-discipline among students in a virtual learning context (Yang, 2021). The lack of social interaction in E-learning environments poses another critical disadvantage, impacting students' academic performance and motivation (Ray, 2020). Without addressing these multifaceted challenges, the push for continuity in education amidst the pandemic risks becoming ineffective, potentially leading to disengagement and a halt in learning (Ramachandran, 2021).

Shvetsov (2020) confirmed that an effective support system is paramount to experience the full benefits of virtual learning. This is still needed even though there is already human resiliency. Dianito, et. al. (2021) proved in their study that students were able to continue studying because of the healthy support system behind them. Since COVID-19 brought pandemic brought increased unrest, burnout, and stress, physiological and psychological supports are necessary for learners. (Futch & Carter, 2020)

Support does not only come from family. It could be from the community and local government. (Anwarudin, et. al., 2021) It could also be from peers, specialists, and personal carers. (Khumalo, et. al., 2021).

In exploring the complexities of virtual learning environments, researchers Sobia Shafaq Shah and colleagues (2021) delved into how such settings affect student engagement, particularly focusing on the role of basic psychological needs. Their study, involving a web survey of 689 students across ten universities in Pakistan—half public and half private—revealed that while the direct impact of the virtual learning climate on student engagement was not confirmed, the mediation of basic psychological needs significantly influenced this relationship. Essentially, the extent to which students felt their fundamental psychological requirements were met or neglected played a crucial role in their engagement levels.

In a parallel inquiry, Namjul Hasan and Yukun Bao (2020) investigated the effects of students' perceptions of e-Learning failures on their psychological distress during the COVID-19 pandemic. By conducting a virtual survey among college students in Bangladesh, they discovered that negative perceptions of e-Learning, dubbed “e-Learning crack-up,” markedly increased psychological distress. Moreover, the fear of losing an academic year emerged as a predominant stressor for students amidst the pandemic's disruptions.

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### 3. Methodology

The researcher conducted a Phenomenological descriptive research wherein results may propose the experience is complex, engrossing, virtual yet real, human-like, and social. This design is used to describe the real-life experiences of the participants during the pandemic.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling technique wherein the researcher intentionally selected participants of the study who have had experienced counseling sessions with their Social Work instructors during the COVID-19 pandemic to explore the experiences of the participants.

The study took place at Wesleyan University-Philippines, a distinguished institution founded in 1946 and affiliated with the United Methodist Church. Situated in Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija, the university is recognized for its commitment to providing non-sectarian and non-profit education. This research focused on a select group of participants, specifically Bachelor of Science in Social Work students from various year levels, who were chosen through a purposive sampling technique. This method enabled the researcher to target individuals who could offer significant insights based on the study's criteria, which included being a regular student from the first to the fourth year who sought counseling during the pandemic. Excluded from the study were second courser students, student leaders, and those counseled by faculty members outside of the social work department. The participants, each identified by a unique code for anonymity, represented a diverse cross-section of the student body. Their profiles varied in terms of year level, ranging from first to fourth year, and their ages were primarily in the early twenties, with one exception being 26 years old. They hailed from various locations across Nueva Ecija, including Cabiao, Sto. Domingo, Palayan City, San Leonardo, Gen. Natividad, and Cabanatuan City itself, reflecting a wide geographical coverage within the province.

The reasons for their in-depth interviews were equally diverse, capturing a range of challenges faced by students during the pandemic. These included academic issues such as non-compliance with academic requirements, personal challenges, difficulties adjusting to virtual learning, mental health issues, complaints about instructors, and financial problems. The interviews were conducted over a span of nearly a year, from March 2020 to February 2021, highlighting the ongoing impact of the pandemic on students' educational experiences and personal lives. This nuanced approach to participant selection and the broad spectrum of their experiences provided a rich foundation for exploring the major impacts of the findings on the population studied. The participants of this study were ten (10) current BS Social Work students at Wesleyan University-Philippines who sought counseling during the period of March 2020- May 2021. The data to be collected was assessed through the use of guided and structured questions delivered to validate questions and participants' answers.

The study used a semi-structured in-depth interview to gather data. The researcher used guide questions composing of two parts. First part is about the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants which consists of course and year level, address, religion, family's source of income. Then, the second part are open ended questions which were composed of the perception of the students on virtual learning; challenges encountered; coping strategies, and learning acquired/gains. The participation of the participants in this research study is completely voluntary. It was indicated in the informed consent that they have an option to withdraw from the study anytime without any obligations. If a participant decided to withdraw his participation, all data provided by him will be eliminated from the study and will be discarded properly.

In conducting the research, privacy and dignity of participants were paramount. Interviews were recorded via mobile phone and messenger, with recordings strictly used for documentation and accessible only to the researcher, research adviser, and research rater. Ensuring confidentiality, participants' identities were shielded, using code names throughout the study. Equitable treatment was ensured by thoroughly briefing participants about the research, allowing inquiries, and addressing concerns transparently.

The trustworthiness of data was a critical focus, recognizing the challenges of establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research. The researcher validated statements with participants, who reviewed their interview transcripts to confirm accuracy. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement and selecting known participants, enhancing the truthfulness of findings. Dependability was ensured by using participants' own words for accuracy. Transferability indicated that replicating the study under similar conditions would yield consistent results. Confirmability was pursued by linking findings to the researcher's assumptions, emphasizing objectivity.

Data collection and analysis were meticulously conducted through qualitative methods, emphasizing the contextual understanding of participants' stories. Inclusion criteria targeted Bachelor of Science in Social Work students at Wesleyan University-Philippines, focusing on those who sought counseling during the pandemic, excluding second coursers, student leaders, and those counseled outside the social work faculty. Post-interview, participants validated transcriptions, ensuring data integrity. The analysis identified themes and sub-themes, providing insights into the family value system and leveraging qualitative data analysis to explore patterns and themes without statistical tests, relying on the researcher's judgment and experience.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The participants of the study were social work students at varying levels of their education at Wesleyan University - Philippines, ranging from first to fourth year. These individuals, between the ages of 18 and 26, come from diverse family backgrounds, each with unique sources of income that contribute to their educational pursuits.

A 21-year-old female in her third year relies on her mother's self-employment and her father's earnings as a tricycle driver. Another 21-year-old female, in her second year, benefits from her father's poultry business. A 19-year-old second-year female student manages her own sari-sari store, demonstrating early entrepreneurial spirit. The oldest participant, a 26-year-old in her fourth year, supports herself through her own mini business.

Male participants also showcased a range of family income sources. A 23-year-old fourth-year student works part-time jobs in labor to fund his studies. Another third-year student, aged 21, is supported by his father's bakery business. An 18-year-old freshman's education is financed by his parents' sari-sari store earnings. Additionally, some participants' families have varied employment such as farming and tricycle driving, indicating a broad spectrum of economic backgrounds among the students.

These descriptions offer a glimpse into the economic diversity within the student body, highlighting the varied means through which families support their members' higher education aspirations.

In examining the experiences of Bachelor of Science in Social Work students from Wesleyan University - Philippines, a range of themes and sub-themes emerged, reflecting the complex landscape of virtual learning and its broader implications on students' lives. These students, spanning from the first to the fourth year, hailed from various municipalities in Nueva Ecija and sought counseling for a myriad of reasons including personal, mental, educational, and financial challenges during the tumultuous period of 2020-2021.

The study highlighted students' Perception on Virtual Learning, revealing diverse attitudes. Some saw virtual learning as a means to Bridge towards the Goal, navigating through challenges to reach their educational objectives. Others maintained an Impartial Perspective, neither fully endorsing nor rejecting online education, while many grappled with The Uncertainty of the Transition to digital classrooms, voicing concerns over the abrupt changes in their learning environment.

Education in the Technology Era surfaced as a significant theme, illustrating the Digital Divide where disparities in technological access and skills amplified the challenges. Teaching Strategies also came under scrutiny, as educators struggled to adapt their methodologies to the virtual format. Students reported Affected Mental Health due to the stress and isolation, while Having Other Priorities and the Difficulty in Using Canvas and Other Online Applications further complicated their learning experience. The sudden paradigm shift, difficulties in staying focused, and disturbances from the physical environment underscored the myriad obstacles to effective learning.

Moreover, the emotional and psychological repercussions were evident in students' Frustrations with unmet goals, Lack of Social Interaction, and the Pressure to perform despite adversities. Fears of falling behind, coupled with a Lack of Character Build Up and inadequate Coping Strategies, painted a picture of a student body struggling to navigate their education amidst significant upheaval.

Yet, amidst these challenges, students identified sources of support and personal growth. Support Groups of peers and family, a renewed Sense of Purpose, the autonomy fostered by Independence and Self-Learning, along with Self-Motivation, Spiritual Experiences, Relaxation Activities, and avenues for Ventilation of emotions, highlighted the resilience and adaptability of students. Despite the temptation of Vices as an escape, the journey also led to the acquisition of Practical Skills and profound Realizations/Insights, contributing to their personal and professional development.

These themes, drawn from the lived experiences of social work students, underscore the multifaceted impact of virtual learning on students' academic journey, mental health, and personal growth, offering a window into their resilience and adaptability in the face of unprecedented challenges.

### 4.1. Theme 1: Perception on virtual learning

The exploration into students' perceptions of virtual learning revealed nuanced viewpoints, categorized into themes and sub-themes that reflect the diverse experiences and attitudes towards this educational mode.

#### *4.1.1. Sub-theme 1.1. Bridging towards the Goal*

Several students perceived virtual learning as a positive conduit towards achieving their educational and career aspirations. They noted an enhanced appreciation for the efforts of their professors and the learning opportunities presented by the online format. For example, RMP mentioned, "Virtual learning can help me achieve my goals. It's not just 'virtual learning.' For me, I appreciate our professors more now. No one really settles for less; they really make an effort, ensuring we learn something as if it wasn't just virtual learning." Similarly, ZGS expressed pride in being a product of virtual classes, acknowledging the professors' efforts to provide the best education despite the challenges. ECR, who has a stable internet connection, found virtual learning efficient, emphasizing its role in allowing students to pursue education amidst the crisis. VAB appreciated the convenience and additional study time afforded by online learning. These perspectives align with Brinson (2015), who suggested that student learning achievement in virtual environments can be equal to or higher than conventional learning.

#### *4.1.2. Sub-theme 1.2. Impartial Perspective*

ARS represented a balanced view on virtual learning, stating, "Online learning is not very difficult, but it is not really easy either. But if I focus, online classes can help a lot." This acknowledges the mixed nature of online learning, recognizing its potential benefits while also considering the inherent challenges.

#### *4.1.3. Sub-theme 1.3. The Uncertainty of the Transition*

Discomfort with the online class format was a common theme among participants. MAS and JMT expressed dissatisfaction and discomfort with online learning, citing difficulties in expressing themselves and feeling overwhelmed by the transition. JLB and RVR noted the disadvantages and challenges of engaging in class activities online, highlighting a sense of disengagement and technical difficulties. SCA described the virtual class experience as very difficult, pointing out the broad challenges faced by students and the opportunity for emotional expression provided by counseling sessions.

These experiences underscore the sentiment that virtual learning, while offering an avenue to continue education, presents significant challenges and adjustments for students. The findings reflect Murphy's (2020) observation that students often experience negative emotions like uncertainty and anxiety when transitioning to virtual classes. Furthermore, Lee (2001) suggested that the success of virtual learning environments might depend on learners' skills and attitudes, indicating a potential disparity in the effectiveness of online learning across different levels of education. While some students find virtual learning an effective means to further their education and career goals, others struggle with the transition, highlighting the complexity of online education and the need for improved support and resources to maximize its benefits.

### **4.2. Theme 2: Education in technology era: challenges and frustrations of learners**

This theme explores the intricate challenges and frustrations faced by learners as they navigate through the education landscape transformed by technology. The participants' experiences shed light on the digital divide, varying effectiveness of teaching strategies, mental health impacts, and the struggle to balance other life responsibilities with academic requirements. These stories underscore the critical need for adaptive teaching methods, supportive learning environments, and resources that can bridge the gap between technological advancements and educational equity.

#### *4.2.1. Sub-theme 2.1. Digital Divide*

The participants expressed concerns over the inconsistent internet connectivity, highlighting a significant digital divide. For instance, ZGS and ARS faced challenges with unstable internet connections, impacting their ability to participate effectively in virtual learning. ECR and JLB struggled with technical difficulties and inadequate internet access, affecting their punctuality and learning engagement. RVR and SA noted the additional challenge of not owning the necessary devices for online classes, emphasizing the financial constraints that exacerbate the digital divide. This situation reflects Wayne's (2007) proposition that e-learning should bridge the divide by enabling effective instruction regardless of geographic constraints. Crews (2002) also highlighted the perception that rural areas are particularly disadvantaged in the digital landscape, underscoring the need for improved access and infrastructure to leverage the benefits of virtual learning fully.

#### *4.2.2. Sub-theme 2.2. Teaching Strategy*

The effectiveness of teaching strategies in a virtual environment was a mixed experience for participants. ARS and ECR noted variations in the quality of instruction, with some teachers failing to provide clear explanations or adequate pacing. JLB and RVR highlighted issues with the lack of consideration and adaptability among some educators, affecting

their engagement and learning outcomes. This diversity in teaching effectiveness underscores the importance of training and familiarization with digital platforms for educators, as suggested by Dung (2020), to enhance the delivery and interaction of online courses.

#### *4.2.3. Sub-theme 2.3. Affected Mental Health*

Participants reported significant mental health challenges exacerbated by the shift to online learning. RMP, ZGS, and JLB described experiences of anxiety, depression, and stress, attributing these feelings to the pressures of adapting to virtual learning and the negative impact of social isolation. These personal accounts align with Faisal's (2021) observation that the COVID-19 quarantine measures have notably affected students' mental health, indicating the need for comprehensive support systems to address these concerns during periods of remote learning.

#### *4.2.4. Sub-theme 2.4. Having Other Priorities*

Balancing academic responsibilities with other life demands emerged as a significant challenge. Participants like ARS and MAS highlighted the difficulty of managing household duties or part-time work alongside their online classes. This struggle for balance reflects Winter's (2010) findings that multitasking between different roles can be distracting and detrimental to students' focus and academic performance.

#### *4.2.5. Sub-theme 2.5. Difficulty in Using Canvas and Other Online Applications*

The transition to using online platforms like Canvas presented a learning curve for many participants. ECR and MAS expressed difficulties with navigating these platforms, emphasizing the challenges of adapting to new learning tools without immediate assistance or the ability to ask clarifying questions in real-time. This situation underscores the importance of providing adequate technical support and training for students to navigate online learning environments effectively, as noted by Judahil et al. (2007).

#### *4.2.6. Sub-theme 2.6. Difficulty to Stay Focused*

Maintaining focus during virtual classes was problematic for participants. MAS, JMT, and RVR reported issues with multitasking and distractions within their learning environment, leading to reduced engagement and exhaustion. Leese (2009) emphasized the importance of employing diverse methods to engage students and maintain their focus in the virtual classroom, suggesting that personalized strategies may be necessary to address individual attention spans and learning preferences.

#### *4.2.7. Sub-theme 2.7. Difficulty to Adjust to the Sudden Paradigm Shift*

The sudden transition to online learning required significant adjustment from participants. ZGS, ARS, and JMT described the initial challenges of adapting to virtual classes, highlighting the stress and uncertainty that accompanied this change. Murphy's (2020) research on the impact of COVID-19 on students' self-efficacy and academic motivation further illustrates the difficulties faced by students during this period of adjustment.

#### *4.2.8. Sub-theme 2.8. Physical Environment Disturbance*

The learning environment significantly impacted participants' ability to engage in virtual classes. ZGS and ARS experienced disruptions due to noise and lack of a conducive study space, emphasizing the importance of a quiet and stable environment for online learning. Malik (2010) noted that a student-friendly online learning interface and the mitigation of technical issues are crucial for student satisfaction and effective learning.

#### *4.2.9. Sub-theme 2.9. Frustrations*

The lack of practical, hands-on experiences and field practice was a source of frustration for participants like RMP and ECR. They felt that virtual learning could not fully replicate the valuable real-world experiences essential for their professional development, echoing Bogo's (2015) emphasis on the critical role of field education in social work training.

#### *4.2.10. Sub-theme 2.10. Lack of Social Interaction*

Participants ECR and RVR noted the absence of social interaction as a significant drawback of virtual learning, highlighting the challenges of engaging with peers and instructors in a remote environment. This lack of interaction points to the need for innovative approaches to foster community and connectivity among online learners, as suggested by Thompson (2013), who emphasized the importance of extracurricular activities and engagement strategies for enriching students' educational experiences beyond academics.

#### *4.2.11. Sub-theme 2.11. Pressure*

The shift to virtual learning has intensified feelings of pressure and stress among students. ARS and JLB shared their concerns about academic performance, participation, and the fear of failing, underscoring the heightened anxiety related to meeting educational expectations in an online setting. Pedrelli (2015) highlighted the unique challenges faced by college students, suggesting that understanding these pressures is crucial for educators to support their students effectively.

#### *4.2.12. Sub-theme 2.12. Fears*

Participants, particularly RVR, expressed specific fears associated with online learning, such as the discomfort of being on camera, which significantly affected their participation and engagement. This fear of exposure and performance anxiety in a virtual setting underscores the need for creating a supportive and understanding learning environment that accommodates students' varying comfort levels with technology, as noted by Martijena (2012), who discussed how environmental challenges influence emotional responses and learning outcomes.

#### *4.2.13. Sub-theme 2.13. Lack of Character Build Up*

ECR pointed out that virtual learning falls short in providing opportunities for character development and engagement in extracurricular activities, which are vital for personal growth and the holistic development of students. The absence of these activities in a virtual learning format highlights a gap in fostering well-rounded individuals, echoing Thompson's (2013) assertion about the significance of a comprehensive educational experience that includes academic and personal development opportunities.

The transition to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a complex array of challenges and adjustments for students. From navigating the digital divide and adapting to new learning platforms to dealing with the psychological impact of isolation and the pressure of academic expectations, students have faced significant hurdles. These insights underscore the need for targeted support systems, flexible and inclusive teaching strategies, and a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences of students in a virtual learning environment. Moreover, as virtual learning continues to evolve, addressing these challenges becomes crucial for ensuring that students not only achieve academic success but also experience personal growth and well-being during their educational journey.

### **4.3. Theme 3: coping strategies**

The participants shared various coping strategies that have helped them navigate through the challenges of virtual learning, highlighting the significance of support systems, personal motivations, and self-reliant learning approaches.

#### *4.3.1. Sub-theme 3.1: Support Group*

A strong support system from family and friends played a crucial role in the participants' ability to cope with the pressures of virtual learning. For instance, RMP and ZGS emphasized how familial encouragement and understanding provided them with the motivation and space needed to focus on their studies. ARS, MAS, JMT, and JLB also mentioned the invaluable support from friends and family, whether through academic help or emotional support, that enabled them to persist through challenging times. This aligns with Bolstad and Lin (2009), who noted the importance of a supportive network for virtual learners, enhancing both cognitive and emotional well-being.

#### *4.3.2. Sub-theme 3.2: Sense of Purpose*

The participants highlighted how a clear sense of purpose and future goals fueled their determination to overcome the obstacles presented by virtual learning. RMP, ZGS, and ECR spoke about their aspirations to become competent professionals and help others, which serves as a driving force behind their academic efforts. This finding echoes Gaunke (2006) and Hsiegh (2007), underscoring the link between a strong commitment to educational goals and academic success.

#### *4.3.3. Sub-theme 3.3: Independence and Self-Learning*

The shift to virtual learning necessitated a greater degree of self-reliance and independent learning among the participants. ZGS, ECR, MAS, and SCA developed strategies for self-study and problem-solving when faced with academic challenges, leveraging online resources and personal initiative. This adaptation reflects the notion by Holmes and Gardner (2006) that virtual learning environments demand and foster learner independence.

#### *4.3.4. Sub-theme 3.4: Self-Motivation*

Self-motivation emerged as a key factor in managing the demands of virtual learning. Participants like ZGS and ECR found motivation in their achievements and the intrinsic desire to learn and improve, demonstrating how self-efficacy can drive academic engagement, as suggested by Zimmerman (2000).

#### *4.3.5. Sub-theme 3.5: Spiritual Experience/Encounter*

For some participants, spiritual faith provided a source of comfort and strength, helping them cope with the stress and uncertainty of their academic journey. ZGS, JLB, and VAB shared how prayer and spiritual beliefs anchored them during difficult times, illustrating the profound impact of spirituality on mental and emotional resilience.

#### *4.3.6. Sub-theme 3.6: Relaxation Activities*

Engaging in relaxation activities such as resting, playing games, or simply taking a break was mentioned by participants like ZGS and RVR as essential for managing stress and recharging their mental energy. This strategy aligns with research by Orzech (2011), highlighting the importance of effective sleep and relaxation techniques for maintaining well-being.

#### *4.3.7. Sub-theme 3.7: Ventilation*

The act of expressing feelings and venting out frustrations was therapeutic for some participants, with RMP noting the positive effects of opening up to others on her emotional health. This supports Parlamis (2012), who emphasized the benefits of venting as an emotional regulatory strategy.

#### *4.3.8. Sub-theme 3.8: Vices*

RVR mentioned resorting to vices like smoking and occasional drinking as a form of stress relief, although this coping mechanism may not be beneficial in the long term and highlights the need for healthier stress management strategies.

The participants utilized a range of coping strategies to navigate the challenges of virtual learning, from relying on supportive networks and fostering a sense of purpose to embracing independence and finding personal motivation. These strategies underscore the complexity of the virtual learning experience and the multifaceted nature of student resilience.

### **4.4. Theme 4: learnings acquired/ gains/ transformations**

This theme encompasses the pivotal skills, realizations, and personal growth experienced by the participants during their journey through virtual learning. The shared insights underline the profound impact of online education on students' personal and academic development.

#### *4.4.1. Sub-theme 4.1: Practical Skills*

Participants articulated significant growth in practical skills essential for both academic success and everyday life. RMP emphasized learning compartmentalization, enhancing her ability to manage various aspects of her life more effectively, reducing feelings of burnout. ZGS and ECR highlighted improvements in time management and responsibility, acknowledging the need for disciplined scheduling and independence in the online learning environment. MAS became more resourceful, a testament to the necessity of self-sufficiency in virtual learning. JMT and RVR noted the importance of avoiding procrastination, with RVR specifically learning to tackle tasks immediately to prevent last-minute stress. VAB shared how balancing work and study has prepared him for future challenges, underscoring the value of adaptability and perseverance.

#### *4.4.2. Sub-theme 4.2: Realizations/Insights*

Deep personal insights and transformative realizations were sparked by the virtual learning experience. RMP spoke of a renewed commitment to her education and future career, driven by a desire to make a meaningful impact. JLB reflected on the importance of resilience and faith, finding strength in adversity and spiritual beliefs. RVR learned the value of seeking help, a departure from his previous inclination to work independently. SCA and VAB discussed financial responsibility and the importance of prioritizing essential expenses, marking a significant shift in their approach to managing resources. These reflections illustrate the participants' journey towards a more mature and focused perspective on life and learning. The narratives shared by the participants reveal a multifaceted transformation influenced by the challenges and opportunities presented by virtual learning. Practical skills such as time management, resourcefulness, and compartmentalization emerged as critical competencies, enabling students to navigate the complexities of online education and life's demands more effectively. The development of these skills reflects a broader

trend towards self-directed learning and adaptability in the face of change, qualities that are increasingly vital in today's rapidly evolving educational landscape.

Moreover, the profound realizations and insights gained during this period highlight the personal growth and introspection spurred by the unique circumstances of virtual learning. Participants' reflections on their aspirations, values, and responsibilities underscore a deepening awareness of their roles and goals within the broader context of their communities and future professions. These findings resonate with the literature on virtual learning and student development, illustrating how online educational environments can foster not only academic learning but also essential life skills and personal growth. As students navigate the challenges of virtual learning, they emerge with a stronger sense of purpose, responsibility, and resilience—qualities that will serve them well in their future endeavors.

The transition to virtual learning, while fraught with challenges, has also been a catalyst for significant learning, growth, and transformation among students. As they have adapted to this new mode of education, they have acquired practical skills, gained valuable insights, and undergone personal transformations that will enrich their academic pursuits and future careers.

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## 5. Conclusions

In this study, it became evident that students' experiences with virtual learning are as diverse as their backgrounds and personalities. The transition from traditional classrooms to online platforms elicited a range of responses, underscoring the complexity of adapting to virtual education. While some students swiftly embraced the new learning mode, appreciating its flexibility and the autonomy it offered, others struggled with the absence of physical presence and direct interaction, finding it challenging to adapt to this significant shift. The hurdles encountered were not trivial; they encompassed various aspects of the students' lives, from mental health concerns—manifesting as anxiety, frustration, and depression—to practical issues like environmental distractions and the limitations of remote learning in delivering hands-on experiences and fostering social connections.

In navigating these challenges, the participants developed a range of coping strategies, demonstrating resilience and ingenuity. They cultivated independence, learning to rely on their own resources and initiative. Motivation played a crucial role, with students finding drive in personal goals and the pursuit of knowledge and skills. Relaxation and recreational activities became vital for mental well-being, tailored to each individual's preferences and circumstances. Importantly, the support of family and friends emerged as a cornerstone of the students' coping mechanisms, providing emotional sustenance and a sense of community amidst the isolation of virtual learning.

The journey through virtual education also led to significant personal growth and the acquisition of valuable life lessons. Students honed their time management and resourcefulness, adapted to new ways of learning and interacting, and embraced the necessity of seeking help and fostering connections. Amidst the trials, their aspirations remained firm, with the ultimate goals of graduation, professional licensure, and contributing positively to society serving as guiding lights.

Despite the initial challenges and the unexpected duration of virtual learning due to the pandemic, the students' narratives reflect a journey of adaptation and perseverance. The experience of navigating virtual learning, with all its complexities and demands, has equipped them with skills and insights that will serve them well beyond their academic endeavors, preparing them for a future in which adaptability, resilience, and the ability to leverage support networks are more valuable than ever.

### *Recommendations*

Based on the insights gathered from the experiences of nine participants with virtual learning, several recommendations emerge to enhance the online educational experience for both students and instructors. Firstly, there is a pressing need for educational institutions to bolster academic counseling and IT support services. Such enhancements are crucial in assisting students to navigate the challenges and anxieties associated with transitioning to virtual learning environments. Recognizing and supporting students who struggle with self-efficacy and adapting to online learning methods is essential for their academic success.

To address the digital divide, school administrators should explore and implement technology standards aimed at minimizing disparities among students. This effort could be complemented by providing instructors with training on effective virtual teaching strategies and developing uniform course requirements to ensure a coherent learning

experience. Additionally, enhancing the functionality and user-friendliness of online platforms, such as Canvas, will further support the learning and teaching process.

Creating support groups is recommended to foster a sense of community and facilitate communication between students and teachers. These groups could serve as a vital resource for sharing coping strategies and providing mutual support. Incorporating spiritual growth into the virtual learning environment, for example, through weekly online university chapel services, can also contribute to the well-being of students and staff.

Finally, teachers and administrators should offer guidance to students grappling with maladaptive beliefs and goals that hinder their academic and personal development. By addressing these challenges, educational institutions can create a more supportive and effective virtual learning environment that empowers students to thrive and succeed.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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