

Perceived Psychosocial Impacts of COVID-19 among Students in Higher Learning Institutions in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania

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Abstract

Students in higher learning institutions are among the groups that experienced psychological difficulties due to COVID-19 disease. This study examined the perceived psychosocial impacts of COVID-19 among students in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam region in Tanzania. The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design. Quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to collect data. The sample size of 200 students was drawn from two higher learning institutions with the population of about 10,375 undergraduate students. Primary data were collected using questionnaire with open and closed - ended questions. Secondary data were collected through documentary review. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that there was moderate to severe perceived fear of COVID-19 infection among students. Anxiety and depression due to challenges encountered by students were moderate to normal. In addition, there was high access to information on the prevention against COVID-19 among students. However, access to counselling services was low among both male and female students. The study concludes that COVID-19 had emotional impacts among students in higher learning institutions. However, it had no severe cognitive functioning impacts. Students' concentration and attention in academic activities were normal. Higher learning institutions should provide counselling services that address emotional impacts such as fear, anxiety, and stress. Psychological counselling should target to mitigate stress, anxiety, and depression among students. In addition, training on stress management and coping skills should be provided and enhanced.

Keywords: *COVID-19 impacts, higher learning institutions, psychosocial impacts*

1. Introduction

COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus. It has had an impact on all people around the world causing psychological trauma that necessitated the provision of counselling and psychosocial support to those affected. University students have been among the affected group of the population by COVID-19 due to psychological difficulties that affected teaching and learning activities (Gonzalez, Planchuelo- Gomez, Irurtia & Luis-Garcia, 2020; URT, 2020a). About 1.6 billion students have been impacted by closure of learning institutions due COVID-19 outbreak. The impacts were significant in terms of social and psychological development, knowledge acquisition and economic aspects (URD, 2020).

COVID -19 has affected teaching and learning directly due to lack of face – to - face interactions. Closure of learning institutions disrupted interactive learning and it negatively affected students learning (World Bank, 2020a; SADC, 2020). The learning process continued using distance mode through online technologies (E learning Africa, 2020). Students were engaged in learning mainly through online delivery including video conferencing and online meeting (e.g. Webex and Zoom). Online delivery also included email, phones, and mobile services (Mugo, Odera & Wachira, 2020).

Despite the challenges attributed by the threats of the pandemic, higher learning institutions continued to focus on their core functions (teaching, research and consultancy). However, restrictions of interaction between students' in higher learning institutions increased psychological effects leading to panic, anxiety, fear, stress, hopelessness, loneliness, and sadness (World Bank, 2020; UNESCO, 2020a). Psychological impacts affected students' ability to think critically, impaired creativity and compromised academic performance. Students also feared for their safety and that of their families (Jezreel, Orendain & Djalante, 2020). Hence, the difficulties experienced by students affected activeness in academic activities and increased loneliness and mental health decline among students (UNESCO, 2020b).

Furthermore, psychosocial impacts affected social and psychological aspects leading moderate to high levels of fear of infection, anxiety, panic behaviour, stress, social stigma, loss of family members, traumatic events and psychological distress (Gellman & Turner, 2013, UNDP, 2020a; URT, 2020a). Moreover, students' emotional difficulties resulting from college closure and disrupted education, led to social isolation and loss of social connection. Mental well-being of the students, resilience and trust were also severely affected (Mboya, John, Kibopile, Mhando, George & Ngocho, 2020; WHO, 2020).

Guided by Emotional processing Theory which originated from Lang's ideas in 1970's, the study explains emotional difficulties that resulted from COVID-19 threats. It also explains disruptions experienced among students and their families that affected their studies. The theory shows that exposure to correct information about COVID-19 (habituation) helps to reduce anxiety, fear, and panic disorders associated with the pandemic. It therefore, allows compliance with preventive strategies and coping mechanisms for COVID-19 among students. Hence, in the context of this study, students continued with the studies despite the threat of the pandemic due to their ability to manage fear and stressful conditions related to COVID-19. The theory posits that absorption of emotional disturbances enables other behaviours and experiences to continue without disruptions (Foa, Huppert & Cahill, 2006).

Efforts have been made to ensure that people in Tanzania adhere to preventive measures against COVID-19. Among the efforts was the closure of education institutions at all levels. Other measures include provision of correct information about the pandemic. Prevention strategies were also insisted to all people countrywide. Despite the closure of schools and higher learning institutions for three months, education continued to be provided at all levels through distance teaching using TV and radio programmes coordinated by the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) and The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST). The provided distance

teaching ensured that every child in urban and rural area get access to education (URT, 2020b). Furthermore, higher learning institutions used online delivery mode such as emails, zoom, and video conference (SADC, 2020, UNDP, 2020b).

However, little is known on how the pandemic has affected students' psychological and social life. The study assumes that a sudden closure of learning institutions and the disruption of students' regular patterns of studies had psychosocial impacts. This study therefore, examined the perceived psychosocial impacts of COVID-19 among students in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam region, Tanzania.

2. Methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design to collect data about the perceived psychosocial impacts of COVID-19 among students in higher learning institutions. The study sample was 200 respondents selected from the population of about 10,375 undergraduate students in two higher learning institutions (Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy and College of Business Education) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Systematic random sampling technique was used to select the respondents in second and third year of study.

Data was collected after re-opening of learning institutions following a three month closure of schools and higher learning institutions. Questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions was used to collect Primary data. Secondary data were collected through documentary review. Data were entered and analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science). The responses were scored 1 for a correct response and 0 for incorrect response. The scores were categorized in percentages as severe (75-100%), moderate (74-50%), and normal (0 – 49%). The respondents were required to indicate their perceived impacts based on the categories that were provided. Psychosocial impact of COVID-19 was measured by 12 items. Cronbach alpha was used to assess the reliability of the items. The acceptable reliability coefficient is equal or greater than 0.70. (Lavrakas, 2008). In this study, alpha coefficient for the 12 items was 0.796, which is an acceptable range. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse data. Moreover, Pearson's Chi - square test was used to determine statistical significant difference of the responses across gender divide. Tables and Figure were used to present the results.

3. Results

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The characteristics of respondents were analysed according to age, sex, occupation, and area of residence. The findings are presented in Table 1

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics of Respondents		M	F	n	%
Age	20 - 24	59	71	130	65
	25 - 29	25	17	42	21
	30 - 34	10	8	18	9
	35 - 39	6	4	10	5
Sex		100	100	200	100
Education	Bachelor Degree year 2	50	50	100	50
	Bachelor Degree year 3	50	50	100	50
Occupation	Student	78	77	155	77.5
	Self-employed	9	7	16	8
	Teacher	10	12	22	11
	Social worker	3	4	7	3.5
Residence	In - Campus	38	30	68	34
	Off - Campus	62	70	132	66

M=Male F= Female

The findings in Table 1 show that more than a half (65%) of the students were between 20 - 24 years of age. Likewise, more than a half (77.5%) of the students were not employed. The findings show further that more than a half (66%) of the students reside in off - campus. The study findings suggests that students had to commute daily to their learning institutions. This had implication for COVID-19 infection risk due to interactions in various public facilities especially during an outbreak of COVID-19. Hence, community mobility contributes to a high risk of COVID-19 infection (URT, 2020a).

3.2 Perceived Psychosocial Impacts of COVID-19 among Students

The respondents were required to rate their perceived impacts of COVID - 19 into three categories severe, moderate and normal. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table: 2 Perceived Psychosocial Impacts of COVID-19 among Students (n=200)

COVID Impacts	Severe	Moderate	Normal	χ^2	df	P Value
Emotional						
Fear of being infected	141(70.5)	39(19.5)	20(10)	1.634	2	0.442
Anxiety about the pandemic	71(35.5)	98(49)	31(15.5)	0.322	2	0.851
Depression following the challenges encountered	73(36.5)	91(45.5)	36(18)	6.677	2	0.035*
Trauma for loosing loved ones	40(20)	55(27.5)	105(52.5)	6.943	2	0.031*
Grief for loosing family members and friends	35(17.5)	66(33)	99(49.5)	8.701	2	0.013*
Social and Cognitive						
Loss of concentration in studies	61(30.5)	61(30.5)	78(39)	0.295	2	0.863
Loss of attention in class	67(33.5)	48(24)	85(42.5)	5.781	2	0.056*
Memory loss	27(13.5)	63(31.5)	110(55)	0.216	2	0.898
Poor academic performance	67(33.5)	75(37.5)	58(29)	2.932	2	0.097
Inability to be creative in handling issues	58(29)	68(34)	74(37)	2.719	2	0.257
Socio-economic pressure	101(50.5)	69(34.5)	30(15)	6.063	2	0.048*
Loss of family livelihoods	96(48)	53(26.5)	51(25.5)	2.932	2	0.231

Numbers in brackets are percentages * = significant at $p < 0.05$

3.2.1 Emotional Impacts

Regarding emotional impacts, the findings in Table 2 show that the perceived fear of being infected was severe as rated by 70.5 percent of the respondents. Also about a half, which is, 49 and 45.5 percent of the respondents reported moderate anxiety and depression respectively following the challenges encountered about the pandemic. In addition, trauma and grief for loosing family members and friends was found to be normal as reported by 52.5 and 49.5 percent respectively. The findings show further that there was a significant difference among the respondents in depression following the challenges encountered at $p < 0.05$. The same was found with trauma and grief for loosing family members and friends with significant differences among responses at $p < 0.05$. This implies that there was depression among students due to the challenges they experienced from the disruptions of their studies.

3.2.2 Cognitive and Social Impacts

Regarding cognitive impacts, the findings show that more than one third (39%) of the respondents reported normal concentration in the studies. The findings also show that attention in class was reported to be normal as reported by 42.5 percent of the respondents. Furthermore, there were significant differences among the responses ($p < 0.05$) on concentration in the studies. Moreover, memory loss due to COVID -19 threat was normal as reported by 55 percent of the respondents. These findings suggest that COVID-19 did not affect students' memory hence it has had no impact on students' studies. Therefore, students managed to concentrate on their studies despite the threat of COVID - 19 infection.

The findings also show that one-third (33.5%) of the respondents reported that they have experienced severe poor academic performance. Moreover, more than one third of the

respondents (37.5 %) reported to have moderate poor academic performance. The findings show further that there were no significant differences among respondents on levels of academic performance. The findings suggest that there were students whose academic performance was affected by the disruptions of studies due to the outbreak of COVID - 19. Despite that the number of affected respondents seems not to be alarming it calls for a need of assisting students to cope with impacts of COVID –19 that affected their studies.

In addition, the finding also show that more than one third (37%) reported that creativity and ability to handle issues was normal. This suggest that COVID –19 had no impacts in cognitive functioning of the students. The students continued with studies without cognitive impacts resulting from COVID – 19.

Regarding social impacts, the findings show that 50.5 percent of the respondents reported that social economic pressure was severe to them and their families. Likewise, one third (34.5 %) of the respondents showed that the social economic pressure was moderate. In addition, there were significant differences among the respondents at $p < 0.05$ on social and economic pressure. Furthermore, 48 percent of the respondents reported to have severe loss of family livelihoods. That is, the pandemic threats affected income generation activities.

3.3 Perceived Access to COVID - 19 Prevention measures

The study sought to determine how students get access to COVID -19 preventive measures. The findings in Table 3 provide the details.

Table 3: Perceived Access to COVID - 19 Prevention measures

Prevention Strategies	Male		Female		χ^2	df	P Value
	Yes	No	Yes	No			
Access to prevention information and services	83(41.5)	17(8.5)	94(47)	6 (3)	5.944	2	0.015*
Access to counselling services	78(39)	22(11)	79(39.5)	21(10.5)	0.030	1	0.863

Numbers in brackets are percentages * = significant at $p < 0.05$

The findings show that 47 percent of female respondents reported higher access to information on prevention and services against COVID-19 compared to male respondents (41.5 %). The findings also show significant differences across gender divide ($p < 0.05$) on access to information on prevention and services against COVID. The findings showed further that only one third, that is, 39 and 39.5 percent of males and females respectively had access to counselling services. In addition, there was no significant difference among male and female respondents on access to counselling services. Figure 1 shows the results.

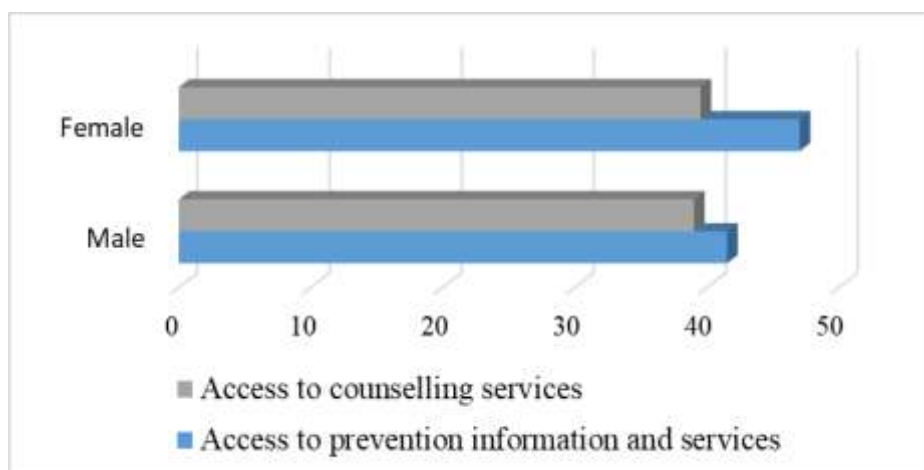


Figure 1: Perceived Access to COVID - 19 Prevention measures

These findings imply that even though both males and females seem to have access to information on prevention and services against COVID – 19, access to information was higher among females than was the case among males.

4. Discussion

The findings reveal that there was depression among students due to the challenges they experienced from the disruptions of their studies. Other studies also reported moderate to severe depression and anxiety as having had negative consequences on academic activities among respondents and low motivation to study (Akorede, Ajayi, Toyin & Uwadi, 2021; Li, Cao, Leung & Mark, 2020; Grubic, Badovinac & John, 2020). This study finding was in contrast with the finding in a study conducted in Northern Tanzania that shows that university students in Tanzania experience high levels of mental distress, which significantly impaired their cognitive functioning, causing learning disabilities, and poor academic performance (Mboya, John, Kibopile, Mhando, George & Ngocho, 2020).

The findings also indicate that the threat of the pandemic affected social economic activities among individuals and families despite absence of the lockdown. Fear of being infected with COVID-19 affected the normal running of both social and economic activities. This had implication in learning and educational outcomes. Students who relied on their own sources for meeting university costs including fees reported that they experienced challenges. UNDP (2020b) and World Bank, (2020b) also revealed that COVID-19 had increased economic and social stress due to restricted movement, social distancing and isolation measures. These contributed in disrupting livelihoods.

The present study show further that even though both males and females seem to have access to information on prevention and services against COVID – 19, access to information was higher among females than was the case among males. This suggests that female were active in seeking

for information about COVID -19 and complied with preventive measures more than did males. The study findings were in contrast with findings in other studies which show that information seeking behaviour and access to reproductive health education was low among females compared with males (Losioki, 2020; Dunor & Urassa, 2019). This also suggests that females were active in seeking for information on matters that were not related to reproductive health and cultural aspects. However, this calls for further investigation.

The study suggests that access to counselling services was low among the respondents. The findings of this study are in line with the finding from a study by Chengula and Losioki (2015) which revealed that there was low uptake of counselling among students. Moreover, counselling relationships and counselling seeking behaviour hindered compliance with preventive measures among students. This implies that there were factors that impede provision of counselling services including counselling relationships, availability of counselling services and inadequate correct information about counselling services. This calls for improvement on counselling services in higher learning institutions.

5. Conclusion

This study examined psychological and social impacts of COVID-19 among students in higher learning institutions. Specifically, the study assessed the perceived psychosocial impacts of COVID-19 as well as the perceived accessibility to COVID -19 preventive measures among students in higher learning institutions. The study revealed that COVID -19 had psychological impacts among students in higher learning institutions. The study revealed further that perceived fear of being infected with COVID -19 was moderate to severe. Anxiety and depression following the challenges encountered by students were at a severe to moderate level. In addition, trauma and grief for losing family members and friends was normal. The study revealed further that COVID -19 impacts were not severe in cognitive functioning of the students. Students' concentration and attention in the class was normal.

The study also revealed that the threat of the pandemic affected social economic activities among students and families despite the fact that there was no lockdown. Fear of being infected with COVID -19 affected the normal running of both social and economic activities. This had implication in teaching and learning. In addition, the study revealed that access to information on prevention and services for COVID-19 was high among females than was the case among males. Therefore, females were active in seeking for information about COVID - 19 and complied more with preventive measures than did males. However, access to counselling services was low among both male and female students.

The study recommends that students should be provided with counselling services that address emotional impacts such as fear, anxiety, and stress. Psychological counselling will help to lower stress, anxiety, and depression among students. The study also recommends that training on stress management and coping skills should be provided as a matter of urgency to students. This would help students to identify irrational beliefs and address them logically.

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