

## Exploring College Students Anxiety In The Context Of Online Learning During The Pandemic

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### Abstract

*With the advancement in science and technology there was a paradigm shift from conventional teaching and learning in the classroom to online teaching and learning or virtual classroom and with this shift there is also an increase in the level of the stress and anxiety among students. The objective of this study is to find out various factors creating anxiety among students through online learning in higher education and also to find out various effects of anxiety on students. For the said purpose the researchers used a self-made semi-structured questionnaire which was constructed by the researchers and administered on 160 students of Under Graduate level, through telephonic interview. Random sampling method was used for selection of students. Data collected was analysed using percentage as well as thematic analysis which was used to analyse the interview transcript. Secondary sources which include books, articles, journals, research papers are also used.*

**Key Words:** *Teaching, learning, online, anxiety*

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### I. Introduction

Anxiety is considered one of the most significant negative factors, encompassing feelings of tension, unease, self-doubt, nervousness, helplessness, restlessness, and negative emotional responses. Many experts have attempted to define anxiety in various ways. Breuer (1999) stated that all anxiety disorders share two main characteristics: excessive emotional fear and physiological hyperarousal. Spielberger (1983) defines anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system.” According to Spielberger’s theory, a certain degree of anxiety can act as a motivator, helping individuals perform better. However, excessive anxiety can hinder performance by causing mental blockages, distracting cognitive resources, and increasing worries and fears. With advancements in science and technology, there has been a shift from traditional in-person learning to online education or virtual classrooms. Unfortunately, this transition has led to a rise in stress and anxiety among students. Psychological studies predict an increase in anxiety-related disorders during stressful times, such as pandemics, due to the corresponding rise in stress, anxiety, and depression (Salari et al., 2020). The prevalence of anxiety among college students has been especially prominent with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The nature of COVID-19 has created a strong link between fear of contracting the virus and an increase in health-related anxiety, particularly regarding respiratory symptoms, which is often associated with anxiety sensitivity (Horenstein et al., 2018). The economic and social consequences of the pandemic have disrupted nearly all aspects of life, affecting people in different ways.

The transition to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted college students, leading to increased anxiety and stress levels. While online education offers flexibility and accessibility, it also presents challenges that can adversely affect students' mental health and academic performance, including feelings of isolation and difficulties in adapting to new technologies. The teaching learning and evaluation have been completely altered with the emergence of the pandemic. Many studies have sought to analyzed the impact of this pandemic from different perspectives. However, this study will pay attention on online learning anxiety during the pandemic among the college students in Shillong area.

## **II. Literature Review**

Studies indicate that students facing general technophobia or specific anxieties related to online courses often experience significant challenges. These challenges manifest as learning difficulties, procrastination in taking online courses or examinations, delays in assignment submissions, and ultimately result in lower academic achievement, particularly in subjects like statistics (Macher, Paechter, Papousek, & Ruggeri, 2012).

According to UNESCO, the onset of the pandemic led to the closure of schools and higher education institutions in 185 countries by April 1, 2020, impacting 1,54,24,12,000 learners, which accounted for 89.4% of all enrolled students. While some countries began lifting restrictions by early May as case numbers decreased, on May 7, schools and higher education institutions were still closed in 177 countries, affecting 1,26,81,64,088 learners, or 72.4% of total enrolled students (IAU-Covid-19 Global Impact Survey).

The studies conducted by Rutkowska et al. (2022) and Tomić et al. (2023) both examined the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students engaged in e-learning. Rutkowska et al. (2022) found that 58% of students experienced elevated stress levels, 56% showed symptoms of depression, and 18% had suicidal thoughts. High stress levels and factors related to e-learning, such as social isolation, negative impacts on academic performance, and reduced motivation, were identified as key predictors of depression, explaining about 66% of the variance. Similarly, Tomić et al. (2023) reported that nursing students in Serbia experienced moderate to high COVID-19-related stress, with first-year students experiencing less fear and stress compared to senior students. Despite these challenges, students expressed reasonable satisfaction with online teaching. Both studies highlight the need for targeted programs to support students' mental health and improve their adaptation to online learning during the pandemic.

In the context of India, Jena (2020) reported that the Covid-19 outbreak significantly disrupted education for over 320 million students. Despite governmental efforts to facilitate continuity through digital learning platforms, a large portion of the population remains without sufficient access to the internet or e-learning resources, particularly in rural areas. This digital divide has hampered effective online education, resulting in further anxiety among students who are unable to engage with their studies adequately. Uncertainties, including postponed external examinations and cancelled internal assessments, have compounded this stress, leaving students feeling stuck in their academic progress.

The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted education systems worldwide, with particular challenges evident in regions like Meghalaya. Shangpliang (2020) highlighted that the pandemic has adversely affected students at every educational level in this state, resulting in closures that create significant losses not only for students but also for educational institutions. The shift to online learning has left many students, especially those from rural and lower-income backgrounds, in a precarious position. While urban institutions have been able to pivot to digital education successfully, rural schools often face stagnation due to limited access to smartphones and requisite technology, leading to educational deprivation that threatens the future of students and society as a whole.

Sangma (2021) further asserted that during the lockdown, students exhibited a readiness to adapt to online learning. However, the transition has not been smooth; nearly 48.4% of students felt mentally and emotionally disturbed, and 34.1% reported significant stress levels. This indicates a profound psychological instability and a lack of preparedness for the demands of online education.

These findings resonate with broader trends observed during the pandemic. For instance, Son et al. (2020) reported that 71% of college students in the U.S. experienced increased stress due to pandemic-related disruptions, reflecting a common sentiment echoed globally. Similarly, Roy et al. (2020) noted that over 80% of adults expressed a need for mental health support during this period, reflecting widespread psychological distress induced by the circumstances. Forte et al. (2020) similarly highlighted that the pandemic has led to increased stress levels, sleep disorders, and psychological discomfort among various population segments.

Furthermore, Tari and Amonkar (2021) observed that while online education can facilitate learning from home, it has also revealed severe disparities, especially for underprivileged students in India who struggle with poor internet connectivity and inadequate resources. The resultant mental stress is notably pronounced among youth, further escalating concerns regarding their academic and emotional well-being. Choudhary (2020) warned that the ongoing educational disruptions could have not only immediate impacts but also long-term economic and societal repercussions for over 285 million learners in India.

### **Objective:**

The objective of this study is

- 1) To find out various factors creating anxiety among students through online learning in higher education
- 2) To find out various effects of anxiety on students.

### **III. Methodology**

This study aims to explore the factors contributing to online learning anxiety among college students during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research employs a quantitative approach, utilizing a self-structured semi-structured questionnaire designed by the researchers. The respondents comprised 160 undergraduate students, selected through a random sampling method from various colleges. Data were collected through telephone-based data collection, ensuring a broad representation of student's experiences. The data were analyzed using percentage analysis, and thematic analysis was employed to extract qualitative insights from open-ended responses. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and their participation was entirely voluntary. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions.

### **IV. Analysis And Interpretation**

- Data depicts that 87.5% of the student's parents' occupation is affected by COVID-19 pandemic whereas 12.5% of the student's parents' occupation is not affected by COVID-19 pandemic. Low income families are much more affected by the pandemic; they are likely to be either unemployed or had decreased working hours. The study shows that a majority of working families have been significantly affected by the pandemic.
- The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly changed the way of life of many college students in Shillong area. There is a complete reliance on electronic gadgets such as internet and smart devices. The usage of these smart devices increased at a fast pace. The study observes that though a majority of working families are affected by the pandemic, the parents still try to fulfil the necessary requirements in order to ensure that their children's education continues.
- Online learning has played a crucial role during the Covid-19 pandemic. The problems which arise with this method if learning cannot be ignored. This is particularly so in the case of those students residing in remote areas where they cannot attend online classes due to the unavailability of proper internet facilities. The data reveals that 52.50% of college students were having issues relating to internet access. However, 47.50% have no issues while trying to access to online classes and resources.
- The data shows that 77.55% college students are able to complete the works given by their teachers. However, only 22.50% college students were not able to complete their works as given by their teachers. The study observes that many families are grappling with financial strain, illness, loss, food insecurity etc., during the pandemic. It is, therefore, obvious that some percentage of college students were not able to complete their works given by their teachers. The study also observes that the same percentages of students are not able to give time to studies because of the above mentioned difficulties which they and their families faced during the pandemic.
- According to the data, 90.00% college students started panicking when there was a sudden disruption of network during online classes, and only 10.00% of them experienced no such problems.
- Data depicts that 95.00% of the students were anxious and 5.00% of the students were not anxious when they could not complete their assignment. The study observes that many college students were facing unprecedented emotional challenges especially when it came to submission of assignments given by their teachers. This was largely due to a lack of access to online resources. Added to this, many students were facing financial issues and hence were unable to afford proper internet facilities.
- Data depicts that 95.00% of the students felt pressure and 5.00% of the students did not experience pressure when they have to prepare for assignments. The study also observes that a majority of college students who felt the pressure are added with more pressure especially when there are many assignments assigned to them by teachers.
- The data reveals that most of the students' experience pressure with the practice of the new system involving technology where a majority of 100.00% of the college students felt the pressure when they could not submit their assignments on specified time.
- According to the data, 50.00% of the college students felt inclined to attend online classes and 50.00% of them felt disinclined. It was observed that many students are facing with unprecedented emotional challenges during the pandemic. Hence, many of them have this feeling of uncertainty to cope with the new system involving technology.
- The study found out that most of the college students are without proper gadget such as mobile, laptops or desktop. Data shows that 60.00% of the students felt the pressure of not having proper gadgets whereas only 40.00% of the college students have no such issue as their gadget can support different online teaching apps.
- Technical problems caused by user's lack of familiarity with the new mode of digital learning can be particularly frustrating and challenging for college students. The study reveal that 52.50 % of the college students lack the basic digital skill and not familiarise with the new online learning system whereas 47.50% of them have experienced in operating (download, upload or open) various learning software.

- The study also found that family factors also contribute to develop anxiety disorder among college students. Such factors are housing condition and home environment. The data reveals 57.50% college students felt uncomfortable with their housing condition whereas 42.50% were comfortable with their housing condition. The environment in which one learns is also incredibly important. Further it also reveals that 80.00 % of the students have anxiety regarding live online classes due to improper home environment which come from family members or friends and only 20.00% of them have no such issues.

#### **Analysis of other relevant Quantitative data**

To support the above quantitative analysis, the researchers has further analysed interview transcript. The finding presented in this paper is the themes emerged from most of the participants, based on the problems faced by the students during pandemic which give them stress and anxiety. Participant's quotes were incorporated to support the different themes. The themes that emerged were; connectivity problem, data plan, effectiveness of online learning, challenges with devices, household responsibilities and stress.

#### **Connectivity Problem**

Participants used the expression "network problem" in their description of their online learning experience. Participants explained that their online learning is characterised with connectivity problems due to poor mobile network. Participants revealed that the poor mobile network denied them of constant internet connection for online learning. They further described that they sometimes miss lectures or cannot follow the discussion on their online platforms because of the network problems they face. Some participants reported that lecturers sometimes truncate lectures due to network problems.

#### **Hame shared the sentiments in this regard:**

*"...sometimes there are network issues, which cause delays in downloading videos or audio. By the time the content has been downloaded and I am able to listen, many questions have already been asked, leading to confusion."*

#### **Hame further gave an account of how he missed a lecture because of network problems. He said:**

*"...there was a lecture conducted on Google Meet, and we were required to download the app in order to join. However, I was unable to attend because I could not download the app due to a network issue. I was not the only one who missed the lecture; other students also reported similar issues on our WhatsApp group, expressing their inability to join because of the same network problems. This situation caused increased anxiety and stress for both me and my peers"*.

#### **Clara also had this to share:**

*"...a lot of my classmates do not get network. Even for my place, the network is bad so sometimes when we are having lectures on Google meet, I cannot hear what the teacher is saying or the ideas other classmates are sharing"*.

#### **Clara also added that:**

*"Even teachers experience problems with their internet connection. Sometimes, during lectures, they mention that the connection is poor, which forces them to end the lecture."*

#### **Data plan**

Regarding the participants' responses, one of the most common concerns expressed by nearly all of them was the cost of internet data plan. Participants were particularly concerned about the expense, as they noted that online learning consumes a significant amount of data. Some participants explained that they occasionally miss online lectures because their parents cannot afford to purchase internet data plan. As a result, online learning becomes financially burdensome, with many participants spending the majority of their pocket money on data. The following illustrations highlight how some participants described their concerns.

#### **Kenny said:**

*"Internet access is expensive, and online classes consume a significant amount of data."*

#### **Some students added:**

*"Sometimes, I have to miss my online classes because my parents cannot afford to purchase an internet data plan."*

*"Since we are five siblings, it is difficult for my parents to afford recharging the internet."*

### **Effectiveness of Online learning**

Most of the participants in the study shared their experiences, expressing that online learning is not effective. They highlighted many aspects they miss, such as their teachers, face-to-face learning and teaching, their classrooms, and their friends. To support this

#### **Virginia illustrated:**

*"Online learning it is not effective at all".*

#### **Pynhunlang added**

*"I do not find this method of learning effective. As a slow learner, I often struggle to keep up with my peers, which results in falling behind. In contrast, I find that being in a traditional classroom setting is more conducive to my learning. I would prefer to return to a college environment."*

#### **Some students added by saying**

*"Online learning is not effective".*

*"I am concerned about the possibility of not being promoted to the next grade."*

### **Challenges with Device**

All participants in the study used mobile phones for online learning. In discussing their experiences, some participants shared that they faced challenges related to the devices they were using. They explained that this made it difficult for them to access certain websites and install apps necessary for online learning. Additionally, participants noted that some of their classmates do not engage in online learning due to a lack of appropriate devices

#### **Steven described his experience in the following manner:**

*"My phone is not advanced enough to support the activities I wish to perform. At times, it becomes slow, and there are certain websites I cannot access due to its Android version."*

#### **This quote highlights Jonathan's experience:**

*"There is a PDF app that I need to download for my assignment, but my phone does not support it, which has prevented me from completing the assignment. Additionally, my parents are unable to afford a new phone."*

#### **Kenny also explained that:**

*"My phone occasionally freezes during online classes, requiring me to restart it. By the time I am able to return to the session, numerous comments have already been made, which makes it difficult to follow the discussion. However, I believe that any participation is better than none."*

#### **Kenny added that:**

*"it is better than some of my classmates who do not participate at all due to the lack of a smartphone or laptop."*

#### **Richmond also added that:**

*"I do not have an appropriate smartphone for my online classes, and my parents are unable to afford a new one. As a result, I often have to copy notes from my friends."*

### **Household responsibilities**

Participants explained that the home environment is not conducive to online learning. They shared that their participation in online learning is often influenced by various forms of disruption at home. These disruptions primarily stem from the need to engage in household responsibilities, such as cooking for the family, caring for younger siblings, and assisting their parents at their workplace. Participants clarified that fulfilling these household duties sometimes prevents them from attending online lectures. Additionally, their parents often complain about the amount of time they spend on their phones

#### **Clarity illustrated:**

*"It is quite challenging because, as a girl, my mother expects me to assist with household chores. When she sees me on my phone for extended periods, she often complains about my prolonged phone usage. For example, there was a time when I had an assignment to complete and submit, but my mother repeatedly called me to help her. I attempted to explain the situation, but she did not fully understand why I needed to be on the*

phone for such a long time. Balancing household responsibilities and online studies is, therefore, quite difficult."

**Stephan comments provide an example of how the performance of household production influenced his online learning:**

*"Our classes typically begin at 8 a.m. and end at 12 p.m., and I cannot ask my mother to wait for me to finish my lectures before preparing meals. As a result, I often find it difficult to attend all of my classes."*

**Dahun put it this way:**

*"Studying at home is very distracting because, at times, I hope to concentrate for about three hours, but my mother frequently complains about my extended phone use for learning without assisting with household chores. She also expresses frustration that I expect her to cook for me while I am at home."*

**Joe also said:**

*"I do not always have the opportunity to be online during the scheduled lecture times, as I work with my mother in the fields. At times, the classes coincide with when I am helping her, which makes it difficult to attend."*

**Some college students added by saying**

*"I have to look after my grandmother, who is ill,"*

*"I help my family members and contribute to the family income, which leaves me with little time to study or attend my online classes."*

### **Stress**

Participants in this study also explained that online learning is very stressful for them, particularly for students whose parents are labourers and cannot afford to purchase a new or smart phone. It is especially challenging for students who lack a proper smartphone, sufficient time to study, or the ability to attend classes while at home. They also experience stress when they do not have a stable internet connection, cannot afford to purchase data packs, or are unable to submit assignments on time. Additionally, some students feel stressed when they worry about falling behind their peers, especially those who are slow learners.

**Fabian said:**

*"It is very stressful for me because I do not have a smartphone to attend classes. I cannot ask my mother to buy me a new phone, as she is a labourer and the sole breadwinner in our family since the passing of my father."*

**Daman also added:**

*"We have four brothers, but only one phone, and all of us need to attend online classes. This situation is stressful for me, as I often worry that I will not be able to submit my assignments on time."*

**Joy also added by saying:**

*"I come from a poor family, and both of my parents are labourers. There are times when they cannot afford to purchase an internet data pack for me to attend classes, which makes the situation very stressful for me."*

**Pynhun also share:**

*"It is very stressful because, while at home, I have to look after my younger brother, which leaves me with insufficient time to study. Additionally, it is stressful when we do not have a stable internet connection, as our parents cannot afford to install Wi-Fi in our house."*

**Some college students added by saying**

*"It is difficult to obtain materials or books since the library is closed, and we cannot afford to purchase them. The inability to submit my work on time causes me significant stress and anxiety."*

### **Major Findings:**

1. A significant 87.5% of students reported that their parents' occupations were adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to increased unemployment or reduced working hours, particularly among low-income families .
2. Many students faced significant barriers to effective online learning. These challenges included:

- **Connectivity Issues:** Students experienced frequent "network problems," making it difficult to attend classes
  - **Financial Strain:** The cost of internet data was a burden, with many students missing classes due to their parents' inability to afford internet data plan.
  - **Device Limitations:** Most students relied on mobile phones, with many lacking access to adequate smart devices necessary for online learning , .
  - **Household Responsibilities:** Students often had to assist with household chores and other family responsibilities, hindering their ability to focus on studies .
3. The study highlighted that a substantial majority of students experienced stress and anxiety as they struggled with the demands of online learning, especially under inadequate home environments and pressure to meet academic expectations. Approximately 95% felt anxious regarding assignment submissions and network disruptions during classes .
  4. Over 80% of the students reported feeling anxious during online classes due to their home conditions and a lack of support for their learning needs.
  5. The study noted that a substantial portion of students (95%) felt pressure when unable to submit assignments on time, and many reported feeling anxious about their ability to keep up with classmates, particularly those who were slower learners .
  6. Students found it difficult to access educational resources due to library closures and financial constraints, which compounded the challenges they faced in completing assignments and studying effectively.
  7. Despite the financial strain, most parents still attempted to meet their children's educational needs. However, the reliance on electronic devices increased dramatically, highlighting a growing dependency on technology for education .
  8. Household responsibilities significantly disrupted students' study time. Many students reported that they had to balance their studies with tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings, which contributed to their stress levels .
  9. More than half (52.5%) of the students lacked basic digital skills necessary for navigating the new online learning environment, leading to feelings of frustration and insecurity regarding their ability to complete their education .
  10. The type of home environment was a significant factor in students' comfort levels and academic performance. About 57.5% of students felt uncomfortable with their housing conditions, affecting their ability to focus and learn .

## **V. Discussion Of Major Findings:**

The findings of the study revealed that majority of the students' parents' occupation is affected by Covid and this have an impact in the continuous participation of the students in an educational programme because students many not be able to attend classes because of various life demands.

The findings of the study indicates that college students were having issues relating to network access and it makes them anxious. This finding is in consonance with the finding of Haque, Hannan, Imaran, Alam, Mattubber, and Saha, (2021), Muilenburga, and Berge, (2005) and Tari and Amonkar (2021) which state that internet speed affects the level of anxiety and access to the Internet acts act as a barrier to online learning and increase mental stress on students.

The findings indicates that majority of the students felt the pressure of not having proper gadgets to continue their participation in online classes besides that they are also anxious and felt pressured when they could not finish their work.

The findings indicated that majority of the students felt pressured because they do not have proper housing conditions as well as proper home conditions. The finding is supported by the findings of Lischer, Safi, and Dickson, (2021) which revealed that students find difficulty with the limited space available and even structural conditions and indicated learning online was difficult as well as stressful. Furthermore, the findings also revealed that students fell stress with the paradigm shift from offline to online learning and this is supported by the study of Sangma, (2021) which indicates that students were mentally stressed when they are not prepared for online learning.

## **VI. Implication Of The Study:**

The implications of the study highlight several significant drawbacks of online learning. While the study acknowledges the benefits of online learning, such as the provision of gadgets by parents to support students' education, it also reveals that online learning contributes to various mental health issues, including increased stress and anxiety. The study indicates that online education can be particularly challenging for students from low-income working families. Furthermore, technical difficulties, such as the lack of reliable internet access, inadequate devices, and unfamiliarity with digital learning platforms, are identified as negative impacts of online learning. Other factors contributing to anxiety among college students include housing

conditions and the home environment. The study observes that these factors collectively impose a substantial toll on the mental health of students, leading to decreased concentration levels and heightened stress and anxiety. Therefore, it is recommended that educational institutions and administrations provide necessary support, including devices to assist students with online learning, and take immediate action to expand 4G services across the country during the pandemic

## **VII. Conclusion**

The shift to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted college students, leading to increased anxiety and stress levels. While online education offers flexibility and accessibility, it also presents challenges that can negatively affect students' mental health and academic performance. As educational institutions navigate the complexities of this new learning environment, it is essential to address the mental health needs of students. Prioritizing student well-being is crucial to ensure that the transition to online learning is both effective and equitable. By fostering a supportive environment, institutions can help mitigate the adverse effects of anxiety and promote improved academic outcomes. This approach not only enhances the learning experience but also contributes to students' overall success and resilience in adapting to the demands of online education. Ultimately, focusing on mental health and providing robust support systems will be vital in shaping a positive and sustainable educational landscape moving forward

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