

## **A Thematic Analysis of the Journey of Online Learners in the Time of Covid-19**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world and affected all sectors, most especially that of education. Due to the restrictions this has brought about, educational institutions with the residential mode of study were forced to shift to online and distance modes of teaching and learning. On the other hand, for educational institutions which specialize in Open and Distance eLearning (ODEL) such as the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), this was not new for the students. However, even if these students were already familiar with online learning, they were still experiencing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in their respective communities, affecting the teaching-learning process. This study aimed to determine the coping mechanisms of students in response to the pandemic and the factors instrumental for them to adjust. Descriptive statistics were applied and themes of the narratives were identified, based on students' strategies for coping with stress and the different activities used to help improve their wellbeing. Furthermore, factors affecting their drive to adjust and live with the crisis were identified. As a result, three major parameters for coping with stress and four favored activities done to destress by the students, a majority of who practiced these for more than a year, were identified. Moving forward, most students found strength in their families to adopt to the new normal situation. Despite their familiarity with online learning, UPOU students were still affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Keywords**

Coping mechanism, Distance learner, Stress reliever, Wellbeing studies

## **Introduction**

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and its restrictions have changed the lives of people from all over the globe. Classified as “an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus” (WHO, 2021), COVID-19 is highly transmissible as it can be spread by an infected individual through their mouth or nose whenever they speak, cough, or sneeze. Upon infection, a person may be asymptomatic, have mild to moderate symptoms, or suffer severe illness that may ultimately lead to death. In the Philippines, nationwide lockdowns were ordered to avoid the spread of COVID-19, which resulted in school closures and suspended the conduct of traditional face-to-face classes.

Due to these restrictions, educational institutions from all over the country were forced to shift from the traditional mode of face-to-face learning to the unfamiliar mode of online and distance learning. In October 2020, it was reported by the Department of Education (DepEd) that for School Year 2020-2021, around 50,000 public schools made the shift to distance learning, which required students to make use of online resources, modules, and local media such as television and radio for their lessons (Mendoza, 2020). For higher education institutions (HEIs) who had been practicing the residential mode of education, the shift to online and distance learning brought about the creation and implementation of new proactive policies on the conduct of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities in consideration of the various situations of students with respect to the new learning setup (Joaquin et al., 2020). In addition, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) prescribed HEIs to implement and follow the guidelines of the flexible mode of learning, as described by CHED Chairman J. Prospero De Vera III: “When you say flexible learning, you mix and match the available options depending on the situation of the students, teachers, connectivity and health situation on the ground” (Mateo, 2021).

For these students who were only familiar with the traditional mode of face-to-face learning, the sudden shift to the new mode of flexible, online, and distance learning presented several issues and difficulties in pursuing their studies. For one, students had limited to no access to technological gadgets nor a stable Internet connection, “with 87% of students flagging unstable internet connection” (Beltran, 2021). Another issue encountered was with the vague content of the learning materials and the overload of activities given for them to complete, which should have been minimized to only the essentials of each lesson (Baticulon et al., 2021). Other difficulties the students had faced, based on a study conducted by Rotas and Cahapay (2020, p.147), were: “limited teacher scaffolds, poor peer communication, conflict with home responsibilities, poor learning environment, financial related problems, compromised physical health, and mental health struggles.” Due to these issues, students found it very difficult to study on their own, which resulted in the loss of their self-discipline and motivation to study and caused them immense psychological stress. That being said, the shift in the mode of learning

brought about by the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed changed and impacted the lives of these students, in both academic and personal aspects.

On the other hand, for students of educational institutions which already specialize in ODeL such as UPOU, this mode of learning was nothing new to them. As online learners, they are expected to be prepared to engage in an online learning environment and equip with the resources necessary for online and distance education. However, although they are already familiar with this setup, the reality is that the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions have also changed and impacted their lives not only as online learners, but also as people. Based on a study conducted in 2021, it was found that the study habits of students in distance learning universities were negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding was associated with “difficulties in managing workload and limited interaction with other students” (Aristeidou & Cross, 2021 p. 263), and it was reported that the learning activities of revisions and live synchronous sessions were the ones with the highest negative impact, attributed to the changes in the routines of the students in terms of employment and family responsibilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions.

Furthermore, other studies have found that students employed various coping strategies to deal with the anxiety and stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which had positively impacted their wellbeing. In China, the top choice of students was to seek social support (Nurunnabi et al., 2020) while in Poland, students coped through acceptance, planning, and seeking emotional support (Babicka-Wirkus, 2021). However, it was also found that students employed coping strategies that were harmful to their wellbeing, such as: denial, venting emotions, substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame.

Given these issues, the individual journeys of these online learners must be looked into; specifically, their strategies for coping with stress, which include chosen activities for the improvement of their wellbeing, and the factors that help them adopt the new normal situation. By identifying these, important information on the situation of students can be gathered and used for the development and improvement of academic and student support systems in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which can contribute to increasing the overall wellbeing of these students as online learners.

## **Methodology**

This study made use of an online survey instrument. Due to the online mode of learning and the current COVID-19 situation, an online survey was sent to the undergraduate students of UPOU who enrolled in a Physical Education (PE) 1 course in the Academic Year 2020-2021 (Table 1). Specifically, these students belong to the Associate in Arts (AA), Bachelor of Education Studies (BES), and Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Studies (BAMS) programs of the university. In the survey, consent was requested from the students, as respondents were informed that their shared answers or information and identities will be

kept confidential, and that the data will strictly be used for instruction and research purposes. Out of the 113 respondents, the majority were female. Furthermore, most students were less than one year into their respective programs while the least number of respondents were three years and above into their respective programs. Lastly, majority were fulltime students while the rest were part-time students who were working.

**Table 1** The sociodemographic profile of the research respondents.

FACTOR	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
<b>a. Gender</b>	40	35.40%	73	64.60%	113	100
<b>b. Years in the program</b>						
3 years and more	0	0	2	1.77%	2	1.77%
3 years	0	0	6	5.30%	6	5.30%
2 years	0	0	15	13.27%	15	13.27%
1 year	0	0	5	4.42%	5	4.42%
less than a year	40	35.40%	45	39.82%	85	75.22%
<b>TOTAL</b>						<b>100%</b>
<b>c. Status as student</b>						
as working student	8	7.08%	16	14.16%	24	21.24%
full time student	32	28.32%	57	50.44%	89	78.76%
<b>TOTAL</b>						<b>100%</b>

This survey was administered in the PE 1 course, a non-academic course with the objective of imparting to students the concepts of physical fitness along with its importance even in an online learning set-up. Moreover, the students of the PE 1 course were chosen as the respondents for this survey, which consisted of questions on personal coping strategies and activities related to physical fitness, health, and wellbeing, due to the focus of the PE 1 course on these three concepts. In addition, as the course also aimed to help the students adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was suitable for them to answer this survey, which gauged their current situation with this crisis.

A total of 113 students returned the survey, which was accessible via Google Forms. This instrument consisted of five open-ended questions, with the main objective to gather the complete and detailed answers of the students as a means for them to narrate their individual journeys during the COVID-19 pandemic. All data was collected from December 2020 until March 2021. For the data collected, thematic analysis was employed to look into the individual ideas concerning the effort to survive this the COVID-19 pandemic and for a more comprehensive approach in analyzing and understanding the shared experiences of the students. Some descriptive analysis was also done. In this study, the quantitative method used was the tallying of raw data gathered from survey questions #2, #3, #4, and #5 while the qualitative methods used thematic and descriptive analyses for the

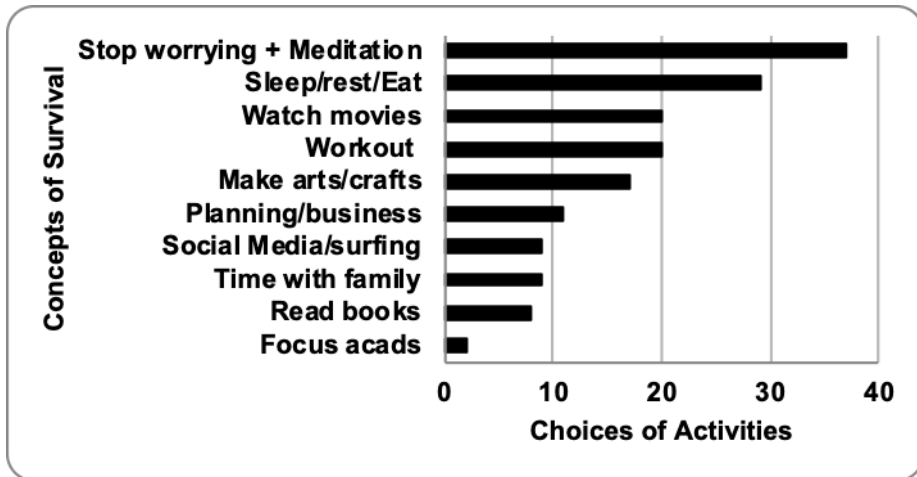
processing of the raw data gathered from all survey questions. Moreover, given that the study was a purely qualitative study that made use of thematic analysis, the number of respondents was adequate enough.

## Results and Discussion

### Strategies for coping with the current situation

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, coping with the stress brought about by this situation is of utmost importance, which can be ensured by the proper care and maintenance of one's own physical and mental health and overall wellbeing. Given that people have different coping mechanisms and ways to de-stress in order to survive the current pandemic, it can be said that these certain activities reflect their own concepts of coping or ideas and decisions of what must be done on a regular basis to survive. For the students, having these strategies for coping with stress enabled them to continue on and improve themselves despite the stress of the pandemic.

As students were asked to identify one, two or three activities that helped them during this period, the study found that the following activities were the top choices to destress at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic: sleep/rest/eat (25.66%), watch movies (17.69%), workout (17.69%), and the combination of stop worrying and meditation (32.74%) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Physical and social responses of students to pandemic situation.

Sleep/rest/eat was the most repeated choice by the respondents because in March 2020 until the first month of 2021, several lockdowns were enforced and therefore most, if not all were staying in their homes. In case of classes being suspended and submission of requirements adjusted, this created the chance for the online learners to take a break from their

busy schedules. Moreover, the majority of the undergraduate students also work and/or have their own family to take care of, and perhaps this gave them respite from the overcrowded schedules they had. Even watching movies was considered as their resting time.

The third most repetitive choice was working out either at a private gym or at home. It was determined that preparing physically was just right and going back to workouts can be helpful to the students' health and wellbeing.

The next popular choice, the combination of "Stop worrying and meditation" was just right for the students. In order for them not to over stress themselves, they gave their worries to their own God, which has helped. Regardless of religion, the students chose to rely on their own faith, which is attributed to their high regard for religion; the sociocultural value that stemmed from deep historical roots and personal experiences.

On the other hand, the study found that the following activities were the least three choices of the students: time with family (7.96%), read books (7.07%), and focus on academics (1.76%). This is due to the busy schedules of family members with the demands of school and work, students' encounters with reading materials for their academics, and the need to destress from their academic courses.

The activities chosen and practiced by the students the most at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic are aligned with a study conducted in December 2020, which identified several healthy ways that students have been advised to practice and have observed to cope with stress brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. These were identified as exercise, nutrition and sleep, as the study mentioned that students are also using the coping strategies like yoga, exercise, diversion therapy such as spending time with family and watching television, and having a break time, which included watching a movie (Yasmin et al., 2020). Other studies on the coping strategies utilized by students in the Philippines given the remote learning setup also found that students practiced looking for good space and time, looking ways to divert attention; regulating oneself and praying" (Rotas & Cahapay, 2021). To deal with the anxiety brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions, students would be keeping busy at home to avoid thinking about the virus; and leaning on faith by praying, worshiping, and reading the bible (Agaton & Cueto, 2021). The practice of stop worrying and meditation can be attributed to students' familiarity with meditation through religion and nature, especially in the context of the Filipino culture, as it has been found that there is a diversity of religious values among Filipino students (Ye, 2017) and proved that students' exposure to nature has decreased their stress levels (Payne et al., 2020).

Based on the results of this study, the students, although already familiar with the online learning setup, confirmed that they still needed to employ their own strategies to cope with the stress and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the situation, it is understandable that the students placed great importance and took great care of their

physical and mental health and wellbeing by sleeping, resting, and eating well, which ranked as the group of activities done most by the students that proved to be healthy for their wellbeing, as evidenced by their statements in the survey and performance in the PE 1 course. In relation to health and wellbeing, the activities of watching movies, working out, and the combination of stop worrying and meditation were also chosen as the activities done most by the students, which can be attributed to the students' compliance with minimum health protocols by staying within the confines of their own homes and the need to have a positive outlook to move forward (Agaton & Cueto, 2021). Furthermore, given the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the students had enough quality time to spend on these activities within the confines of their own homes.

For the activities that were least chosen by the students: time with family, reading books, and focusing on academics, this is attributed to the possible lack of time students have spent with family members given the work from home and study at home setup that has been practiced since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it has been found that this has a negative effect on the personal lives of individuals (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020) as they have found difficulty in keeping within working and non-working hours (Grant et al., 2019). Moreover, more students preferred to do leisure activities to cope, resulting in the lessened increase of time spent on work/study (Morse et al., 2021).

Given this, the researchers were able to identify three major categories of strategies for coping with stress or destressing activities. These are supported by the various activities the students had done to improve their wellbeing and their narratives in response to the question: "What was your first plan to de-stress your life?"

The first major category that was identified was physical and emotional rest through spending one's own time doing meditation, and having time with family. Students expressed that they chose to watch netflix and lay in bed and sleep, eat, and relax as it was very important for them to get enough rest and more time for myself. In terms of meditation, students had to learn the ways to de-stress from different methods (meditation) and chose to worry less, build (a) stronger relationship with God, calm down and handle things one at a time, count blessings, engage to church ministries, shut themselves away from people who caused stress, and quit social media. Students also ensured that they had time with their family, as they chose to relax with their family and spend time with them and friends more. Students also spent time with their friends, who they considered as family, as they chose to catch up with my social life, talk to friends, and play games with my friends.

The second major category was physical preparation through working out and planning for the future. To de-stress, students chose to do workouts by dancing, zumba, gardening, biking, badminton and have a routine workout to keep themselves healthy and fit.

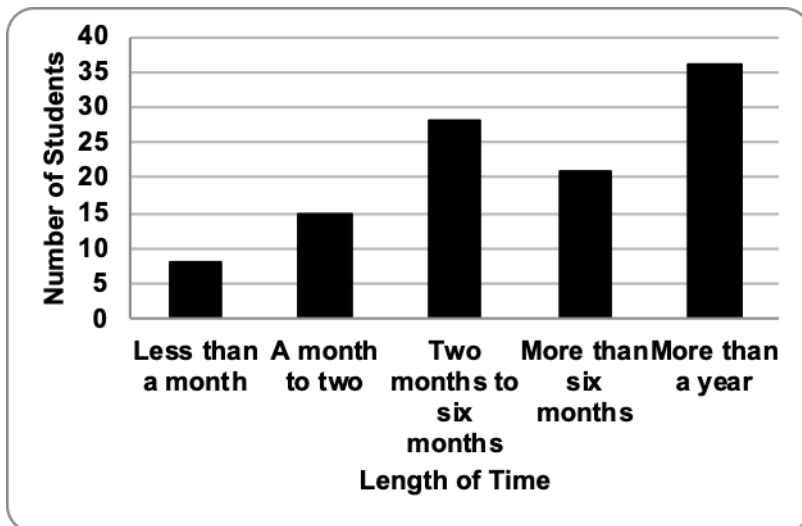
Students also planned and prepared for the future as they planned ahead (list all tasks and goals), make schedules, to-do lists, and self-care days, and even through online selling.

The third and last category that was identified was getting back to the basics or concentrating on simple ideas and tasks through learning and re-learning skills by making arts and crafts. Students did activities such as crocheting, photography, creative tasks like digital drawings and video editing, painting, creating more artworks and doing personal art. Through being productive by going back to the hobbies they once loved and creating, the students have been able to de-stress. Other students also took it upon themselves to learn new skills such as playing the guitar and by enrolling in a skill-related program.

Overall, the other activities of spending time with their family and having their own time to watch movies, use social media, surf the Internet, and read books pertained to the coping strategy of physical and emotional rest. For the activities of planning for the future, planning and doing business, and focusing on academics, these are also aligned with the coping strategy of physical preparation. Lastly, the activity of making arts and crafts falls under the coping strategy of getting back to the basics, which is done by learning and re-learning skills in the arts.

#### **Length of time the students maintained their chosen activities**

The students were then asked to specify how long they practiced their chosen activities in order to help them survive the difficulty with the current pandemic as shown in Figure 2. It was found that the majority of the students practiced their chosen strategies for coping for more than a year, while the least number of students practiced these for less than a month.



**Figure 2** Duration of activities from the onset of the pandemic.



If the respondents were doing positive activities such as: workout, meditation, basic life skills, and learning for more than a year then the path to improving personal wellbeing can be helped (Buot, Montecalbo-Ignacio, 2021). On the other hand, if the negative activities are not controlled, such as watching movies beyond the waking hours, then this can lead to another problem in terms of their health and wellbeing.

The majority of the surveyed students have been practicing the following activities for more than a year, which is still attributed to their need to cope with the vast uncertainty and anxiety of the COVID-19 pandemic: sleep/rest/eat, watching movies, working out, getting back to the basics, and stop worrying/meditation.

Meanwhile, other students have remarked that they had practiced the following activities for two to six months, more than six months, one to two months, or less than a month, due to some factors such as lack of interest or time or the development of self-efficacy and familiarity with the situation (Freire et al., 2020): time with family, reading books, and focusing on academics.

#### Factors affecting students' drive to adopt the new normal

Lastly, the students were asked to identify the people who helped them adopt the new normal situation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the results of the online survey (Fig. 3), the factor or person that was identified by the greatest number of students was: oneself (61 students). This was followed by: family (36 students), significant other (31 students), and church/group (23 students). The study found that the majority of students relied on themselves to adopt the new normal, while the least number of students found help through their respective church or support system, or did not seek any help at all. Nevertheless, it was shown that the students found strength to come to terms with the new normal in themselves, their families, significant others, and religion.

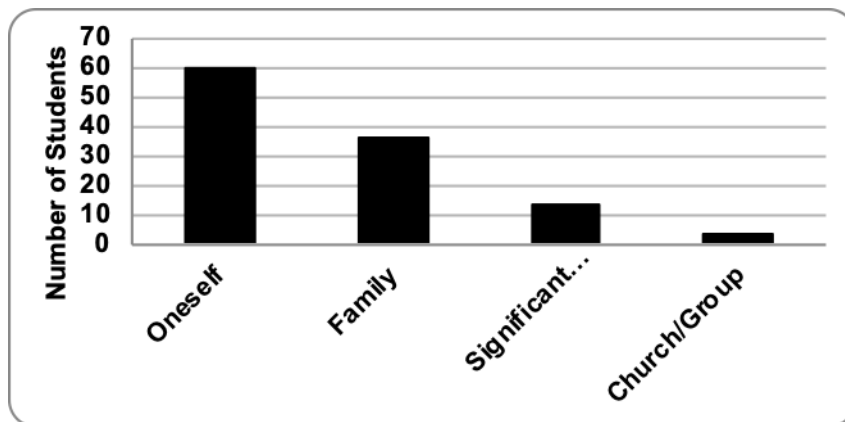


Figure 3 Different individual/institution influencing the “new normal” adoption of the learners.

### **Drive to adopt the new normal situation**

Finally, the study found that the majority of students relied on their own selves to adopt the new normal situation. This is attributed to the fact that these students, as online and distance learners, have developed an attitude and character of independence given their practices of self-discipline, self-learning, and self-efficacy, required of them as students of the UPOU. Due to their online education, these students have become independent and efficient, recognizing that they must rely on their own focus, motivation, organization, and patience (Flenner, 2021). In addition, other students also identified their family, significant others, and church or group as the people who helped them adopt the new normal, which can be due to the collectivist nature of Filipino culture and society, which is manifested in a close long-term commitment to the member group, be that a family, extended family, or extended relationships (Buot & Dulce, 2019; Hofstede Insights, 2021) wherein loyalty and strong relationships are fostered.

Thus, the attitude of students as online and distance learners and the value of their social relationships and ties with their own family, friends, and social institutions have helped them maintain their wellbeing.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on the results of this study, it is evident that online learners were and still are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions. For undergraduate students of UPOU, although they were already familiar with the ODeL setup, they still had to find ways to cope with the current situation that changed other aspects of their lives which in turn, also impacted their academic performance. From the students' chosen activities, the following three major categories of strategies for coping with stress were identified: physical and emotional rest, physical preparation and getting back to the basics.

All of the activities the students had identified which helped them cope and improve their wellbeing pertained to the above-mentioned strategies for coping with stress.

For the majority of students, they had practiced their chosen activities for more than a year. Although some activities such as watching movies, using social media, and surfing the Internet can be harmful to their wellbeing when done in excess, the students would work to improve their strategies for coping and do both positive and negative activities in regulation. This is guided by the following statements that have been gathered from their shared narratives such that UPOU will enable them to continue their studies given the Distance Education (DE) mode; and self-discipline to study in order to graduate. After graduation, they will be able to achieve personal goals for themselves and their families, and contribute to beneficial change for the country.

With the various uncertainties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, these students realized the importance of completing their studies at UPOU in order to achieve personal and professional goals. Given this, they must continue to maintain and improve their overall wellbeing to ensure good academic performance by improving their chosen strategies for coping with the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic .

While this study has contributed to the knowledge base on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions to online and distance learners, it is recommended that more studies should be conducted to understand and analyze the impact of the pandemic on the lives of students enrolled in ODeL in the Higher Learning Institutes. This can be done in order to make the necessary action that is inclusive for all, develop helpful resources, and implement efficient support systems that will help them with their academic performance and benefit their overall wellbeing. In turn, these will help them survive, cope, and adopt the new normal situation.

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