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COVID-19 and online distance learning in Malaysia: A blessing or a curse?

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This study intends to investigate the extent to which students' learning experience has been meaningful and satisfying, and their sentiment on online distance learning due to the implementation of emergency remote teaching (ERT). The study further analyses the causes of Malaysian university students' grievances and challenges and psychological effects in dealing with ERT during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and MCO in Malaysia, which prohibited any face-to-face interaction between the period of 18 March 2020 to 30 May 2020. This study employs qualitative methodology in analyzing the content of social media comments following a video post on students' frustration about online distance learning (ODL). Our study provides evidence that ODL, as experienced by the students during the MCO, presented numerous pedagogical, technological, and social challenges which caused a great deal of stress and affects students physically and psychologically. By capturing and analyzing the comments made for a viral video posting of a Malaysian undergraduate student about her personal experience undergoing the ODL, we identify nine factors that contributed adversely to students' learning experience during the ERT period. In more in-depth, we find that the continuous academic assessment tasks, coping with new method of teaching and learning and excessive workload are the main pedagogical challenges. Additionally, technological challenges were present due to lack of reliable internet connection and digital technological equipment and finally, social challenges arise from the lack of family support and understanding, conflicting roles and responsibilities, need for emotional support and uncondusive learning environment. Leveraging on the students' experience, we deduced that their encounter with ODL is a reflection of the application of emergency remote teaching (ERT) philosophy.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, online distance learning, emergency remote teaching (ERT), Malaysia, higher education, stressors

Introduction

COVID-19 ravaged the world due to the sudden nature of the outbreak and the infectious power of the virus (Cao et al., 2020). At the beginning of the outbreak, the only way of curbing the widespread of the virus was through social distancing and quarantines.¹ Many countries have taken the most extreme measures by imposing lockdowns, travel bans, and restrictions on movements to curtail its disastrous effects. While the intensity of the pandemic had changed throughout the past 3 years, at the height of the pandemic, a total of 151 country-wide school closures had been reported affecting 1,291,004,434 learners –which is 81.8% of total enrolled learners.² Higher education

1 <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

2 Education: From disruption to recovery (<https://www.unesco.org/en>) Enrolled learners include - pre-primary, primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary levels of education.

institutions responded to the announcements of restrictions of movement by the immediate transition to online teaching and learning which is more aptly termed as “*emergency remote teaching (ERT)*”.³ Such overnight recourse to online teaching and learning was a quick (but not painless) fix to provide continued access to education through online learning.

Online distance learning (ODL) has become the main source of teaching and learning when face-to-face interaction was not possible. In an ordinary circumstance, ODL was a learner’s choice when they feel that going to class is not feasible for them. In this situation, the online learners are usually equipped with the right online learning platform, devices and working Internet connection. In contrast, during the recent pandemic, students and learning institutions around the world were “forced” into online distance learning almost overnight. Given the situation, all involved parties had to utilize whatever available resources and skills were at their disposal concerning the new instructional strategies without adequate training and preparation.

Studies on ODL went back as early as in 1970’s where earlier, issues pertaining to methods and hardware were mostly of interest. Recent studies on ODL incorporates issues pertaining to users, from their readiness, challenges, experiences and satisfaction. Other studies, went further to explore emotions and feelings of learners while undergoing online learning (Liu et al., 2016, 2019). The relevance of studies of users’ experiences and emotions are even more pervasive when Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) were widely available to many segments of learners. Analyzing users’ direct reviews, surveys and feedbacks have become an important source of information to understand about user experiences and emotions when facing with online mode of learning (Liu et al., 2016). Some novel methods have been utilized such as the text mining methods, various sentiment analyses, and social and epistemic network analyses, to gain insights about learners’ emotions and social-cognitive engagement in online learning (Liu et al., 2019, 2023).

Unlike the normal online distance learning which is implemented normally by choice, “ERT” oversees an unplanned and sudden transition from the normal face-to-face classroom to an online setting during a crisis, in this case, a health crisis. Most studies find that ERT is vital during the pandemic as it allows for accessibility and continuity of learning amid the restriction of movement (Ferri et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; El-Sakran et al., 2022). While both the crisis and ERT, by nature shall be a temporary occurrence, their disruptive effects, unfortunately could be long-lasting (Aucejo et al., 2020). Aucejo et al. (2020) in his study at the United States largest public institutions found that because of the pandemic, students had to delay their graduation (particularly for those students from the lower income families), lost a job, internship, or job offer, and expected to earn less at age 35. Similarly, the ERT had caused decline in students’ academic performance, learning loss and worse of all affecting students’ psychological health (Cao et al., 2020; Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021; El-Sakran et al., 2022).

3 Emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a shift in instructional delivery that provides temporary access to education in a quick (and reliable) way. It may not be perfect, but students are resilient, faculty are resourceful, and everyone has to make the most of what they got (<https://blog.neolms.com/on-challenges-and-opportunities-emergency-remote-teaching/>).

According to UNESCO, as of May 31, 2020, there are a total of 2,410,713 affected learners in the tertiary programs in Malaysia (1,392,152 females and 1,018,561 males).⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic was announced in Malaysia on January 2020, and on March 18, 2020, a nationwide “Movement Control Order” (MCO)⁵ was declared. In response to the MCO and the intensifying concerns surrounding COVID-19, all universities suspended face-to-face learning interactions and transitioned to virtual and online platforms, thus ensuring the continuation of education and minimization of any disruptions or significant learning loss. The pandemic on its own has been affecting many aspects of the economy, social relations, culture, education, and health issues to the general public. Due to the uncertain nature and trend of the pandemic outbreak, many calls were made for prioritizations of students’ health and safety before resuming face-to-face learning. In response to such calls, Malaysian universities have used the online platform to continue to deliver lectures, tutorials, and assessments to students in the form of online distance learning, a mode of ERT. As most students have been asked to leave their dormitory residences and colleges, students are undertaking the ERT from home. While the immediate response by Malaysian universities in conducting online teaching and learning is received positively and commendably from the macro perspective, indicating the level of the country’s readiness in their digital infrastructure to undergo digital transformation, the hidden challenges have not been directly addressed.

This study aims to explore the challenges and subsequent effects of online distance learning (ODL) implemented in the context of emergency remote teaching (ERT) during the recent COVID-19 pandemic to university students in Malaysia. In particular, this study examines the extent to which students’ learning experiences have been meaningful and satisfying and their sentiment on online distance learning due to the implementation of ERT. The study further analyses the causes of Malaysian university students’ grievances and challenges and the ensuing psychological effects in dealing with ERT during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and MCO in Malaysia, that had prohibited any face-to-face interaction between the period 18 March 2020 to 30 May 2020. To achieve the above purposes of the study, the content of social media comments following a video post commenting about a student’s frustration about online distance learning is analyzed. Our qualitative analysis indicates that ODL, as experienced by the students during the MCO, presented numerous pedagogical, technological, and social challenges which caused a great deal of stress and affects students physically and psychologically.

Theoretical framework

Though there is a rapid increase and demand for online education prompted by the increased embeddedness of digital technology in society, there is still a salient difference between ERT and online teaching and learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Effective online education

4 <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

5 The “2020 Malaysia Movement Control Order,” popularly referred to as the MCO, is a protected line that prevents anyone from leaving a disease-infected area and transmitting it thereby. Instituted by the Malaysian federal government as a preventive measure in response to the country’s COVID-19 pandemic of 18 March 2020.

is a result of structured and careful planning of the course modules, particularly, concerning teaching resources and assessments, as this shall have a massive effect on the quality of teaching and students' learning. Additionally, online learning also warrants the achievement of learning outcomes as would in the on-campus environment (Magagula and Ngwenya, 2004; Mcphee and Söderström, 2012). Student satisfaction is also not compromised during online learning (Palmer, 2012). On the contrary, ERT is a short-term transition from face-to-face teaching to an alternative mode due to emergency conditions. In most cases, fully remote educational alternatives were adopted but using teaching resources planned for face-to-face instructions. The pressing danger of COVID-19 prompting emergency lockdowns and movement control orders (MCOs) oversaw an abrupt transition to ERT without prior planning and development of course modules befitting online teaching and learning pedagogical strategies. Not all learning contents can be transferred to digital space, especially those requiring socialization and direct contact (Vladova et al., 2022).

On a positive note, at least the pandemic broke during a time where our university students are digital natives and transitioning to learning using digital technologies are almost natural for them (Vladova et al., 2021). These net and Z generations (Vladova et al., 2021) are technology savvy, independent and autonomous learners, and can seamlessly and effectively communicate and socialize (visually and verbally) between the two worlds—virtual and real (Vladova et al., 2021; Scheel et al., 2022). During the COVID-19, shifting to online teaching is not really a choice but a necessity. Although the entire process was intense, demanding, and challenging for both instructors and students (Vladova et al., 2021, 2022), ERT provided flexibility and ensured educational continuity for university students (Ferri et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; El-Sakran et al., 2022), a blessing indeed.

Arguably, an effective nor meaningful online learning experience may not be entirely achievable during these unprecedented times (Ferri et al., 2020; El-Sakran et al., 2022). Students' readiness and acceptance (Hasan and Bao, 2020; Vladova et al., 2021), and instructors' competencies (Hasan and Bao, 2020; El-Sakran et al., 2022; Vladova et al., 2022) have been regarded as important characteristics for a meaningful and effective online learning experience and this may not be achieved in an emergency state (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Instructors may not be able to integrate the much-needed online learning experiences, and there's a high probability of sub-optimal implementation. Thus, instructors and teaching institutions need to thoughtfully, cautiously, and judiciously understand the distinction between well-designed effective online instruction and that which is done virtuously overnight—with minimal resources and limited time. As widely documented, online learning in normal circumstances varies depending on the design, technical infrastructure, and pedagogical use by educators. Online learnings are most engaging when they are personalized, allow students to progress at their own pace, accommodate interactions between students and educators and have a technological interface that is unobtrusive in its display of course material and free from technical problems (Alonso et al., 2005). Online learnings need to balance between learners' characteristics and technology skills (Dabbagh, 2007; Vladova et al., 2021; Scheel et al., 2022). Additionally, the instructors' competencies' navigating and using technology in teaching also influences students' trust and acceptance of digital learning (Vladova et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, many challenges associated with online learning reduces the effectiveness of ERT implementation. Ferri et al. (2020) postulate three open challenges of online learning; (1) technological challenges, (2) pedagogical challenges, and (3) social challenges. Technological challenges are associated with the lack or insufficient digital infrastructure where some students may not have the technological devices and/or working Internet connection to engage in online learning (Ferri et al., 2020; Kapsia et al., 2020; Thampanya et al., 2020; Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021; Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021). Technological challenges inhibits meaningful academic experience during the pandemic and ERT (Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021).

Pedagogical challenges include instructors' skills in using technology and keeping the students focused and motivated through interactive learning activities during synchronous learning (Carrillo and Flores, 2020; Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021; Vladova et al., 2022) and creative and engaging teaching materials such as high quality presentation slides, video recordings, and written communication in forums and chats on learning platforms for asynchronous online learning (Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021). Additionally, ERT has also caused sudden surge of students' workload both voluntarily or involuntarily (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020; Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021).

Lastly, social challenges include lack of suitable home learning environment and family understanding and support (Zhang et al., 2020; Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021). Other than that, students lack of social interaction could be a reason for a less than satisfying online learning experience during ERT (Carrillo and Flores, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Vladova et al., 2021; El-Sakran et al., 2022). Students also find it difficult to concentrate during online classes (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020) due to Internet and social media distractions, lack of dedicated learning space, and other personal issues which may include psychological distress arising from the health crisis itself.

Arguably, the posited challenges associated with online learning have led to less-than-ideal learning experience of ERT (Aucejo et al., 2020). Even worse when these challenges translate into ill-effects to students physical and mental health (Cao et al., 2020; Giusti et al., 2021; El-Sakran et al., 2022) which could be detrimental and long-lasting.

Methods

Data collection

An Instagram video posting of a Malaysian public university student (hereby known as, IG#1) on 18th May 2020 expressing her journey and challenges in online distance learning (ODL) (here, ODL is implemented as a mode of ERT and may be used interchangeably throughout) received thousands of views, shares, and comments from students, educators, and the general public. Similar feelings and emotions toward ODL surprisingly were widely experienced by other university students as reflected in the comment section of the video posting. Since the video post and all comments were made public, analyzing the content of the public responses does not violate any ethical considerations. Nevertheless, the authors sought consent from IG#1 and informed her about using her posting as the data for this study. We assured her that all of her personal information will be kept anonymous and information of the commentators will also not

be revealed. She provided her consent accordingly and volunteered to provide further assistance if required.

All 1,778 comments from the video postings were downloaded and collected in a spreadsheet format. Each comment was read to gain familiarity with the tone of the comments. We classify all comments according to the tone of their comments, i.e., agreeing/disagreeing/neutral to the sentiment in the video posting, sympathetic or unsympathetic. Other kinds of comments that sound provocative, silly, bantering, unrelated, and irrelevant are classified as others. We also prioritize the importance of the comments based on the number of likes displayed at the end of each comment. We noticed that comments that attracted more likes appear to be meaningful and content-laden, as they indicated more than one user sharing the same opinion and sentiment.

Each comment will also be analyzed to see whether their comments are pertaining to online distance learning, either as direct user or instructor/provider of distance learning. Five hundred and eighty-seven comments were dropped from the analysis as it is deemed unrelated or irrelevant to the topic under investigation. The remaining 1,191 comments were carefully analyzed extracting the content into the following database as follows. We also identified the users of these comments and found 980 users of which 662 are females while 309 are males.

The research strategy was instrumentalized prior to the coding process. Following the data cleaning process, both authors strategized the best way to analyze the data. For the first few comments, both authors negotiated the best way of extracting the information and theme from the comments. After finding a reliable and effective method in our coding process, one researcher is made responsible to code all the comments into our research framework. [Table 1](#) below is used to analyze all the comments from the posting by segregating them into the following elements and keywords. This is to ensure that we obtained a high level of consistency in the coding process.

All of the comments from the video posting were made in either English or Malay language (both languages have always been used interchangeably in Malaysia). Since the authors are well-versed in both languages, comments were analyzed and coded in their original form. Only the selected quotations that are used in the findings section will be translated into the English language.

Data analysis

This study uses deductive and inductive analyses using constant comparative methods ([Glaser and Strauss, 1965](#)). To reach a consensus on deductive coding related to the students' challenges of ODL, the researchers coded all the online comments looking for keywords and emerging themes that describe challenges, difficulties, stressors, and concerns to online distance learning.

Our coding process begins without a specific priori coding scheme instead, we looked for a pattern and trends from the comments ([Melão and Reis, 2020](#)). Generally, our first level coding is deduced from 410 comments (that have at least 2 or more likes) in which we looked for keywords that reflect students' grievances, struggles, challenges, and complaints toward their situation in undertaking online distance learning and the associated implications and effects. The remaining comments which are in form of emoticon, thank you note, appreciation, agreement with the content of the videos, and others are excluded from the first-level coding.

In the second level of coding, we framed the emerging themes and patterns from our data, drawing insights from the theoretical framework depicting challenges associated with undertaking ERT during the pandemic. The selection of sub-themes has also been adjusted and refined according to our data. In [Table 2](#), we listed the challenges students faced during online distance learning and categorized them into the appropriate sub-themes, and calculated the number of frequencies these items are mentioned. Interestingly, we categorize health as a challenge to ERT but realized that students' feeling of tiredness and exhaustion, physical pain, and illness, stress, and loss of motivation are not challenges of ERT but instead subsequent physical and psychological effects manifested from the challenges of ERT. [Table 3](#) enlists all the physical and psychological effects mentioned by the students in their comments and the number of frequencies these items are mentioned.

To increase the validity and reliability of the analysis, the second author reviews the data analysis and any discrepancies are resolved through discussion ([Melão and Reis, 2020](#)).

The table lists all the main and sub-themes and the number of occurrences that emerged from the Instagram comments. These keywords may be overlapping in a single comment.

Results

Descriptive analysis

IG#1 made a video posting about the challenges she faced as a student that had to undergo the ODL following the suspension and closure of all learning institutions due to the pandemic outbreak. Her video was posted on 18th May 2020 and has attracted a total of 2,124 comments to date (30th May 2020) with 464,000 views reacting to the issue at hand. For this study, a cut-off point of her comments is taken on the 27th of May with a total of 1,778 comments. [Figure 1](#) shows the number of comments generated from IG#1 video posting on 18th May 2020. The figure indicates that we have extracted all comments during the 'peak' of her video sharing and netizen responses. After day 6, the number of comments declined rapidly. In total, we managed to capture around 84% of the comments made to the video postings. [Table 4](#) summarizes the demographic information of the IG users commenting on the video posted by IG#1. It provides a snapshot of the IG users' gender, student status and tone of comments.

Qualitative analysis

Drawing insights from our theoretical framework, we categorized students' experiences with ODL under the ERT context into three different challenges, technological, pedagogical and social challenges.

Pedagogical challenges

The pedagogical challenges appear to be the most challenging aspect for students undergoing ODL. The pedagogical challenges constitute several different issues as follows:

Continuous assessment tasks and components

Students feel burdened by the continuous assessment tasks and components under ERT. Most universities replaced their summative assessment with formative assessment. This had caused a large

TABLE 1 Data analysis.

User	Instagram comments	No of likes	Sentiment	Keyword 1	Keyword 2	Keyword 3

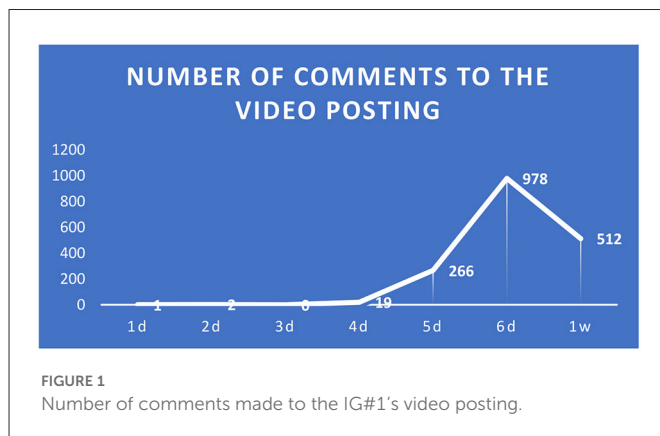
TABLE 2 Challenges theme frequencies.

Challenges	Sub-themes	Theme frequencies
Pedagogical	Assessment tasks	72
	Coping with teaching and learning style and challenges	33
	Deadlines	19
	Technical courses challenges	18
	Excess credit hours/workload	14
Technological	Technology-internet connection issues	36
	Other materials and resources-technical equipment	18
Social	Family relations	72
	Lecturers' relations	54
	Needing support	84
	Financial constraints	4
	Unconducive environment	16
	Part-time work	4
Ill-effects	Tiredness	12
	Physical pain and illness	10

TABLE 3 Physical and psychological effects theme frequencies.

Main-theme	Sub-theme	Effects theme frequencies
Health-related	Mental exhaustion	23
	Stress	20
	Feeling burnout	18
	Physical exhaustion	16
	Mental and physical exhaustion	15
	Mental health issues	14
	Loss of motivation	14

component of the final examination marks (for example: 40 marks) to be redistributed into smaller assignments, quizzes and tests. This had increased student's workload during the ERT semester. Additionally, some group assignments had to be converted into individual assignments adhering to the face-to-face restrictions.



I am taking six different courses which have classes every single day. And when I attend the class, there are always new emerging assignments to be completed. 🤔 (Comment# 66, 8likes)

Plus, all assignments change to individual assignments 😊 but the content in each assignment is equivalent to group work. (Comment# 158, 6likes)

I'm currently in a state of dying, finishing all those extra assessments, particularly for the reading subjects. My oral presentation is replaced with a video presentation. This in itself is a burden. The oral presentation is much easier, you just need to speak up in class, but because of the ODL, we need to prepare a video presentation, which requires video editing. And the video conferencing relies on a pretty unreliable internet connection... (Comment#826, 19likes)

Coping with new method of teaching and learning Lack of interaction

Students were generally frustrated with ODL due to the lack of interaction with the instructors, and their peers. Some have limited abilities to adapt quickly to the new learning style. This notably was among the main stressor for students. Students in general were in dire need to go back to onsite learning. Students generally believed that peer guidance and mentoring were not as effective when done virtually.

Another thing I'm struggling with ODL is when the lecturer doesn't respond to my questions or gets annoyed with my questions. 😞 (Comment #55, 31likes)

For me, the most tiring part is coping with this new learning style. I am a very slow learner, I would have to put it that way. Even during usual class, sometimes I will have to ask my friends to explain the lesson back to me... (Comment #644, 11likes)

TABLE 4 Demographic information on IG users posting the comments.

		Frequency	Percentage
Number of usable comments		1,188	
Number of Instagram users commenting		980	
Gender	Male commenters	309	31.5%
	Female commenters	662	67.6%
	Others (unidentified)	9	1.1%
Status	Students	945	96.4%
	Educators	24	2.4%
	Others	11	1.1%
Tone of comments	Agree	896	75.4%
	Disagree	55	4.6%
	Neutral	7	0.6%
	Sympathetic	22	1.9%
	Unsympathetic	13	1.1%
	Others	198	16.4%

Teaching of technical courses

ERT also appears to be challenging for certain subjects that requires a practical and hands-on approach such as courses that require physical interaction, live demonstration and labs sessions. Due to restriction of movement and physical distancing, any face-to-face instructional activities had been suspended and replaced with ODL. For example, some students argued that their courses such as architecture, engineering, art and design, and even tourism were either too difficult to be understood through the online platform or still required a hands-on approach with continuous feedback from their instructors. In that case, ODL was not regarded as the ideal method of learning.

We are students of art and design in fashion. We are facing a lot of pressure. We are chasing our assignment deadlines. While doing that, we still need to continue sewing the clothes and engage in ODL. Those who already have a sewing machine and know how to prepare a design pattern - are very lucky. But what about those who do not have any machines and do not know how to design a pattern? That's why we need to do these assessment tasks face-to-face. (Comment#200, 14likes)

Another student reflected on her frustration with ODL, particularly for classes or subjects that involved calculation.

Online calculation classes.... Extremely exhausting (Comment #1144, 5likes)

Excessive workload and lack of empathy from the instructor

Students felt that instructors do not empathize with students' struggles and some were very inflexible during ODL. The instructors were not sympathetic with all the challenges brought about by ERT where students had to face excessive workload and technological challenges.

Trying to cope, really but all the lecturers seem so happy giving out work without thinking about how many subjects we're taking this semester. All the assignments regardless of any

subjects are freaking tiring. Not to mention the exercises and the tutorials are given that need to be submitted before the due date (Comment#1069, 34 likes)

I NEED THIS TO GO VIRAL!! It baffles me how some lecturers didn't understand that we are struggling. Some students reported that their lecturers are too strict, and some did use harsh words. Some are just too strict with the attendance while UiTM's infographic about ODL said that participation over attendance was far from lecturers' attention and this is very sad. Some even said their marks got reduced because of video meeting lags while presenting and some got their marks reduced because they sent it a bit late - due to constraints of the technological issue (internet problem/platforms' problem) which should be tolerated. (Comment#748, 34 likes)

Technological challenges

Two main technological challenges presented by the students below had hindered them from gaining meaningful learning experience of ODL.

Unreliable internet connection

Another critical challenge for students undertaking ERT was the lack of reliable Internet connection to support online video conferencing during ODL. Students who were located in remote places had difficulties in gaining access to a fast-working internet connection. Similarly, not all households had a Wi-Fi connection which was rather essential to provide a stable and uninterrupted Internet connection. Instead, students relied on free unlimited mobile data offered by certain service providers with a promise of 4G network capacity only to be hit by unreliable service, which were not at all capable of supporting students' digital requirements. Due to unreliable Internet connection some students were not able to partake in ODL and had to be penalized for missing classes or delays in their assignment submissions.

I just want my lecturer to understand that my connection is poor and I cannot join the class, and even if I did join, I cannot hear anything and request for the class to be recorded. It's so stressful and sad when the lecturer ignores me when I'm already this stressed about my internet connection. (Comment#279, 23 likes)

You have to understand, not all houses have a Wi-Fi connection. I depend on my mobile data internet connection which is not very reliable (Comment#45, 17 likes)

Not everyone is blessed to have a good source of internet, period (Comment#47, 8 likes)

U mobile's 4G cannot cope with online learning. The 4G is only for the namesake. (Comment#679)

Lack of digital technology and equipment for online learning

Another element that is categorized under technological challenges include the lack of digital equipment to support ODL. Many students indicated that they did not own a laptop and had to do all their lessons and assignments using their mobile phones. This stressed their eyesight and caused fatigue. While owning a laptop/computer is critical for a successful and meaningful ODL experience, to some, it is still a luxury beyond their affordability. One student pointed out that if not for the MCO, they could have easily

gone to the cybercafés for their digital needs. But even that was not an option now.

I am very stressed... I do my assignment using my mobile phone... I attended my Google Meet using classes also using my phone. Huwaargghhh... when can I afford to purchase a laptop? 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔 (Comment#508, 3likes)

It is worse when you don't even have a laptop and need to catch up on every assignment using your handphone like how I am struggling right now. I feel like I am going blind... lol. I want to borrow my friend's laptop, but they live far away... visiting the cyber cafe is not an option as all cyber cafes are closed... (Comment#968, 1 like)

I am struggling to do work using my mobile phone as I left my laptop at the college before the MCO. I did not purposely leave it okay... (Comment#968, 14 likes)

Last month, I had an assessment task that carries half of my final exam marks. Suddenly, my laptop broke down. I cried helplessly not knowing what to do. I sent to get the battery fixed but when I returned home, the screen did not turn on. I went back to the shop only to be informed that the motherboard is fried. I do not have enough money to buy a new laptop and humbly asked my parents to pay half of it... (Comment#109, 18 likes)

Social challenges

Finally, the social challenges also affected students' meaningful learning experience under ERT. Students mainly faced with conflicting tasks and responsibilities when they were studying from home. Arguably, ODL undertaken from home appeared challenging and uncondusive which presented with many underlying challenges.

Lack of family support and understanding

Studying from home was very challenging as students felt obligated to fulfill their family commitments and responsibilities. While parents may or may not sought their help in doing the house chores, some students felt obligated regardless. Most students felt frustrated when parents did not understand their struggle and did not offer the required support but instead passed hurtful comments and judgments.

I am the eldest in the family. I am juggling online classes and assignments. I am always torn between completing the house chores, and online classes and meeting assignment deadlines. I am very tired. I hope all our struggles will be rewarded with good grades and achievements. (Comment# 422, 31likes)

One student explained how she needed to care for her nieces and nephews as her siblings thought of her being at home on a semester break.

If you live in a household with small children, it is taken for granted that you would have to help out caring for your nieces and nephew. I am conflicted and want to inform them that I am not free, this is not a semester break. But unfortunately, people will not understand what we are going through. People only know how to judge and complain. ODL is very tiring. (Comment#320, 39 likes)

Another student felt that her family did not understand what she was going through, nor offering the moral support that she needed, but instead accusing her of being weak-minded.

I cried watching this video. Finally, someone understands what I am going through. Right now, I need moral support. My family doesn't understand... They always say I am weak and always under stress. (Comment#368, 39 likes)

Another student said that his parents were very skeptical of him and accused him of spending too much time playing games.

Every day, I am struggling in front of my laptop doing assignments and studying but my parents think I am only playing games. I study to make my parents happy but they do not understand. I am sharing this because I am stressed (Comment#738, 58 likes)

Other comments resonated similar sentiment where students felt that their parents did not really empathized nor offered the right support in light of their predicament during these times.

My mom has been complaining, and other students' moms have also been complaining that all we do is sit in front of the laptop. By right, as we are approaching Eid-ul-Fitr, I should be helping my mom with the preparation. But instead, I am tied to my laptop 24 hours, trying to meet datelines, completing additional new assignments, and preparing for quizzes that are scheduled immediately after Eid. (Comment# 754, 29 likes)

Sometimes I feel really sad because my family places very high expectations on me but unfortunately I did not receive the required support from them. I am losing my mind because of this... (Comment# 583, 16 likes)

Conflicting roles and responsibilities

The pandemic had caused financial constraints to many people and this student was no exception. This student had to wear several hats; not only as a student, he was also the breadwinner of his family, and a health worker during a pandemic, which can be extremely demanding and exhausting. His struggles became exacerbated when universities implemented the ERT that was rife with various pedagogical challenges of its own.

I'm a 3rd-year psychology student ... My father is a Taxi driver and the industry is suffering very badly now. I have no choice but to work to help my family. To make it worse, I am an ambulance medic. Due to COVID-19, my work shift is doubled or tripled, and you will not imagine how I have attended my online classes. Sometimes I attended the online class while I am in the ambulance...it is fine for me as I chose this work. That means I need to learn how to balance my work-study-life responsibilities. The university may not care for you. As long as the syllabus is completed, that is their main aim while we are rushing here and there completing the assignment and at the same time trying to save someone's life. It is not an easy feat. (Comment #435, 21likes)

Need for emotional support

Students require emotional support from their families and peers as studying at the university level are very demanding and challenging

(Al-Kadri et al., 2011). Even more so when they were faced with the current health crisis and sudden enforcement of ERT. They wanted and needed to share their struggles and challenges in adapting to the so-called “new normal,” which had caused a lot of distress for them. To some extent, the video posted by IG#1 gave them a lot of comfort as it resonated with and validated their struggles.

Thank you for saying it out loud! I have been extremely struggling to adapt to this ODL without any support from family. I felt extremely down, up to a point that I did not do any work for 2-3 days. I cried every night caused I do not understand the subjects...I'm a slow learner so I struggle to understand... (Comment#1148, 26likes)

Thank you so much, sis!! You just made me feel a lot better after struggling with assignments and tests non-stop these days. 🌸🌸❤❤🍌🍌🍌🍌❤❤ (Comment#252, 3 likes)

Your words comfort me so much... Thank you (Comment#131, 2 likes)

In fact, through quick filtering of the comments, IG#1 received 66 thank you notes for sharing her setbacks with the ODL learning.

Unconducive learning environment

A conducive environment helps facilitate an effective online distance learning experience for students. While we expected that all students have their rooms equipped with sufficient equipment, software, and hardware to be engaged in the ODL, some students may not even have the luxury to own a room. As a result, the student may be exposed to many disturbances which could be disruptive to his/her ODL experience. Additionally, staying home reduced students' motivation to engage in learning as the home environment reminded them of a place of rest and holidays.

I agree. The environment is different. Staying home conflicts, the studying environment with the environment of having a holiday thus, it demotivates us to learn. Not only our body becomes tiring but our mind as well. Some of my friends are already thinking of dropping their courses due to a lack of focus and motivation (Comment #421, 12likes)

That does not count the time I spend shooting video presentations because the surrounding is noisy and has a lot of disruption. Add to that I have to do all the house chores including cooking (Comment #505, 31)

It will be easier for you if you own your room with all the necessary furnishing. Can you imagine the one who does not even have his or her room? (Comment #1118, 12likes)

Physical and psychological health effects of ERT

The foregoing challenges faced by the students undergoing ODL under ERT context had inadvertently affected students physical and psychological health. The following comments suggested that most students were overburdened, with a very tight and busy schedule that eventually led to exhaustion and tiredness which was detrimental to their health. Some of the students were already showing signs of physical pain and illness such as headaches and blood pressure.

Physical illnesses may disrupt students' learning schedule and left the students' feeling worried and stressed with the cumulating work load. The comments below indicated the deterioration of students' health due to ERT:

Thank you for letting other people understand the students' conditions 🥲 ya I'm in that state where I want to stop everything. I am too tired. (Comment #7, 4likes)

Since starting ODL, I have consumed so much medication for my headaches. Today I have a fever and a test. I did not study anything, and I do not have the slides. I am also not sure whether the internet connection will be okay. Trust me, I am extremely tired. (Comment #931, 5likes)

One of my friends ended up with high blood pressure because he needs to complete all the assignments due and at the same time prepare for a test. (Comment #1033, 5likes)

As expected I'm not that intelligent. So, I am struggling very much to a point that I am taking paracetamols every day for these few weeks because I felt very sick. My fever spikes twice in a week whereas my migraine occurs almost every day. Same as my gastric problem ... every day. My back hurts very much that I thought it is because of my impending menstrual cramps. The doctors also suggested to undergo Covid-19 tests but it turns out that I am just stressed... (Comment #408, 14likes)

Some of the common complaints from the students indicated physical, mental, physical, and mental exhaustion, feeling of burnout, feeling of stress, loss of motivation, and giving up. The stressful ERT experience manifested into physical and psychological effects which were detrimental to student's mental health as reflected in some of the comments observed below:

I never had any mental breakdown when it comes to studying but this ODL made me feel useless and stupid. Name the worst thought, it was there in my mind. Alhamdulillah my friends are there for me, to check on me 🥲 (It's good to know that they're concerned about you:) (Comment#659, 21likes)

I already have suicidal thoughts with all of this. Every day, my mom scolds me as she thinks I am giving excuses to help around the house. When I explained to her that I am having classes, she labeled me as an ingrate for answering back. I am feeling very stressed that I knocked my head on the wall until it is bruised. Adding up to my problem, my laptop is not starting and the internet connection is slow. Sometimes I cannot submit my assignments on time because my laptop is acting up. When I am late in submitting, the lecturer will not consider giving me any marks. I am very exhausted (Comment#700, 34likes).

This could lead to suicidal attempts for someone who is over their limit and have anxiety issues to not fail. (Comment#763, 5likes)

True, this is what I am feeling right now, you said it all 🥲 I am studying now, now not because I am passionate, but because I am feeling like I am being forced to. 😞, I feel like quitting but I still consider my parents and family so decided against it... I am like a lone survivor. Sometimes I cried, sometimes I can't control my anger and sometimes I can't hold back my tears. Thanks. (Comment#285, 17likes)

Discussion

While proponents of online distance learning have shown evidence that online education enables and fulfills students' satisfaction in the teaching and learning experience, engaging and enhancing students' skills and performance (Biasutti, 2011; Osman, 2020), the findings from this study indicate otherwise. Implementation of ODL in the Malaysian universities presented many underlying challenges and appears to be the cause that triggers students' stress and anxiety to a point that their physical and mental health may have been affected. Our findings adds to other studies (Aucejo et al., 2020; Kapasia et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021; El-Sakran et al., 2022) in uncovering the underlying challenges concerning ERT implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic for university students in the Malaysian universities. Our findings enriches earlier studies in the Malaysian context (Sundarasan et al., 2020; Yusuf, 2020) in which we further identified the "stressors" that caused students grievances which potentially may have affected their physical and psychological health while undertaking ERT.

Our findings indicate that the recurring themes that denote students' causes of stress emanate from academic reasons, particularly, due to the surmounting assessment tasks and deadlines and other pedagogical challenges under ODL. Students' stressors are further exacerbated when a limited lack of support was received from both family and the instructors (social challenges). Similarly, technology challenges have been highlighted in many occurrences that contribute to students' grievances. The students' accounts of their ODL experience indicate that all courses have been moved online without any careful design, planning, and strategies for teaching, learning, and assessment.

We believed that the main reason for pedagogical challenges is contributed by both students' and instructors' novice experience and lack of readiness in navigating online learning (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Hofer et al., 2021). The closure of brick-and-mortar learning institutions does not mean that face-to-face learning can simply be digitally transformed without careful thinking, design, training, and development (Roddy et al., 2017). While the traditional teaching competencies may still apply in terms of knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy, assurance of instructors' technical competencies, skills and readiness need to be determined to ensure online teaching success (Oomen-Early and Murphy, 2009; Vladova et al., 2022). Roddy et al. (2017) proposed seven elements of online instructors' competencies which includes communication skills, technological competence, provision of informative feedback, administrative skills, responsiveness, monitoring learning, and providing student support.

While the case findings do not indicate any instances where the instructor's communication skills, technical competence, and administrative skills (Roddy et al., 2017) were questioned by the students, the same cannot be inferred for the provision of informative feedback, monitoring learning, and student support. There were several instances where students were unmotivated by the instructors' requirement to submit ungraded assignments. Understandably, this will lead to students' feeling unhappy as they still need to commit time and effort to complete them but not receiving any feedback in return seems unfair on the students' front. There were also instances where students feel that they do not receive support and understanding from their instructors. Students have also been affected by the lack of social interaction and receiving peer support due to the MCO

and this arguably can be compensated through the introduction of computer-supported collaborative base learning which can help students maintain social contacts in addition to fostering high quality interactive learning process (Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021).

Considerations of leniency following students' digital gap and deficit were often ignored. First issues with digital infrastructures need to be addressed at the university level and beyond to ensure fair access to learning opportunities to students (Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021). Next, given the understanding that students' socio-demographic background may differ and may significantly affect students' distance learning experience due to many combined reasons such as lack of digital technological equipment, Internet connectivity or dedicated learning space, universities could help address these issues on a case-by-case basis. For example, while maintaining physical distancing students can be allowed to quarantine on university grounds where dedicated learning space and reliable Internet connection are not an issue. Additionally, universities can provide some financial aid to students to help them procure digital technological equipment that can be used for their online learning (Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021). The apparent lack of face-to-face interaction, guidance, and mentoring for the more technical and challenging courses, while cannot be entertained under MCO, were not being compensated effectively. For example, Yusuf (2020) suggested that perhaps for courses involving mathematical computation, institutions need to limit the number of students in each session to accommodate students' needs could help alleviate students concern in this regard. Vladova et al. (2021) also suggested for breakout session in small groups which can help support students' learning. Eberle and Hobrecht (2021) proposed that simulation-based learning can also be an alternative to lab-based courses.

Similarly, the continuous accumulation of assessment tasks and components for every course that the students were enrolled in, the duration of lectures that extended beyond the normal teaching hours, and in some instances, classes were held during the holiday have also mentioned as causes that leads to students' dissatisfaction toward ODL. Eberle and Hobrecht (2021) suggest that the underlying issue with excessive workload could be overcome through self-regulation and acquisition of time-management skills. Arguably, the amount of workload may not be significantly different than onsite teaching but adjusting to ERT, such as coping with issues related to digital infrastructures and skills, could contribute to why students perceived that their workload has increased tremendously (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021).

Students also need to understand that the continuous ongoing assessment is not the instructors' calculated intention to burden the students. The continuous assessment aptly fits with the face-to-face teaching strategy in the ERT mode, which still aims to strive at meeting students' learning outcomes. Arguably, the revision of assessment tasks into ongoing assessments to monitor students' learning is crucial. If not for the MCO, students can still gather in an examination hall and undertake a closed book examination which can adequately access students' achievement in the required domains of learning. Obviously, in the current state, this is not an option. Thus, to salvage the situation, continuous ongoing assessment is necessary to equip students with all the required learning outcomes, particularly for courses that set the fundamentals for other higher-level courses. Similarly, instructors are not willing to send out their graduates to the industry with the partial achievement of program outcomes. Closing the loop is much more challenging after the students leave the

institutions. On the contrary, online assessment, if carefully designed aims to cater to student's readiness to move on to the new content, a tool to support students' learning and understanding of students level of learning rather than strict testing of students' achievement in certain domains of learning (Means et al., 2014; Hodges et al., 2020).

We argue that despite the students' torturous encounters with ODL, ODL is not to be blamed, but ERT disguised as ODL is the underlying reason that causes students' stressful experiences. What the students have experienced indicates the application of emergency remote teaching (ERT) in Malaysian universities as a responsive and immediate action in a crisis to ensure learning continuity and reduce learning loss, but as shown in the findings, happened at the expense of students' meaningful learning experience, satisfaction, and even worse, their physical and mental health.

The implementation of ERT relies on whatever existing online learning experience that students and instructors have accumulated to date. In an emergency state, instructors, institutions, and even policymakers have very limited resources and time to invest in digital transformation. Instructors' practical experience on online education, perhaps, was gathered through some implementation of blended learning, of which element of online involves, at most, embedding assessment, discussion, and interactive materials online, or at minimum, online dissemination of resources and assignment to the students (Wong et al., 2014). While instructors underwent immediate training for adopting online platforms such as Google Meet/Classroom or Zoom, there was limited time to train and develop instructors' skills and competencies to take on exclusive online teaching in a crisis. Similarly, the students were never really prepared for independent and active learning which is a critical element in online education (Arghode et al., 2018).

Students and instructors, both, were thrust into ERT unprepared and channeled their grievances as a faulty online distance learning (ODL) experience. While at this juncture, any remedial action may be remotely beneficial to reverse the effects on students' satisfaction, it is nonetheless a great learning curve for institutions and policymakers to prepare for future ERT implementation. At the minimum, all course syllabus needs to be modified to cater to the current situation that calls for remote teaching. Both the institution and instructors need to identify their strategy in realistically handling the academic emergency and this direction needs to be communicated especially to the students. This may help reduce students' grievances once they are informed about the teaching, learning, and assessment strategy under the ERT mode. Next, instructors need to invest time and effort as part of their professional development agenda to develop their technical competencies and presence to make teaching and learning more meaningful under the ODL circumstances. Additionally, making some efforts to care for students' social-emotional wellbeing can help students navigate and channel their anger, anxiety, and depression in a stressful situations.

It is unfortunate for the students that the pandemic robbed them of their valuable and meaningful learning experiences. But all is not lost. This is temporary and it will pass soon. More importantly, we need to salvage and find a solution to reverse the negative psychological impact, if any, and to improve the students' mental health. The government needs to invest in preparing the educators' and students' mental, intellectual, and cognitive competencies to embrace and embed complete digital transformation to prepare for crises and disasters striking in the future. The current circumstances provide a good training ground to evaluate our readiness from the

socio, economic, and health perspectives and to devise a national agenda and policies to close any gaps. Going forward, the digital infrastructure needs to be made accessible, and reliable at a very low cost as it should be considered a basic essential rather than a luxury. No student should experience any digital deficit if ODL is going to become our new norm.

Conclusion

Our study provides evidence that ODL as experienced by the students during the MCO are rife with challenges and causes a great deal of stress and affects students physical and psychological health. By capturing and analyzing the comments made for a viral video posting of a Malaysian undergraduate student about her personal experience undergoing the ODL, we identify three main challenges and nine factors that contributed adversely to students' learning experience during the ERT period. Notably, ERT implementation amongst Malaysian university students were confronted by pedagogical, technological and social challenges which inadvertently affected students physical and psychological health. In more in-depth, we find that the continuous academic assessment tasks coping with new method of teaching and learning and excessive workload are the main pedagogical challenges. Additionally, technological challenges were present due to lack of reliable internet connection and digital technological equipment and finally, social challenges arise from the lack of family support and understanding, conflicting roles and responsibilities, need for emotional support and uncondusive learning environment.

Leveraging on the students' experience, we deduced that their encounter with ODL is a reflection of the application of emergency remote teaching (ERT) philosophy. As such, comparing ERT as an equal to ODL is unjustifiable as many prerequisites of ODL were not met under the current circumstances. Nevertheless, taking this as a learning opportunity to revolutionize our education by preparing both our students and instructors for a complete digital education makeover should be highly prioritized by higher learning institutions and policymakers.

Our main contribution lies in identifying the underlying challenges emanating from students' experience undertaking online learning in ERT circumstances. We also believed our method of collecting our data by using the content from social media is unique and in parallel with the pursuit of global digital transformation agenda. Using social media enables the collection of thoughts and responses from a wider audience without the element of researchers' bias as the authors were never involved in any way in the video posting and comments. Nevertheless, we also believed that investigating the students' accounts for ODL is rather one-sided and remains the limitation of our study. To get an overall picture of how to transform the path of our education, we need to gain perspectives from every stakeholder involved. Hoping that we never need to experience another episode of ERT, this study provided an important insight to check our level of readiness to embrace digital education.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was obtained from the participant identified as IG#1 for participation in the research and for the publication of potentially identifiable data. The social media data was analyzed and used in accordance with the platform's terms and conditions and all relevant national/institutional regulations.

Author contributions

KK contributed to the conception, design of the study, organized the database, performed the analysis, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. SS wrote Introduction and Conclusion sections of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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