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Undergraduate Occupational Therapy Students' Experiences in Online Distance Learning for Skilled-Based Subjects During COVID-19 Pandemic: A Descriptive Phenomenology Study

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Abstract: COVID-19 hugely impacted the students' learning, in which experiential learning was not allowed to be implemented to decelerate the spread of the virus. Thus, educators used whatever capacities and abilities they had to ensure that the students learned the skills, especially for certain skill-based occupational therapy subjects. However, studies regarding occupational therapy students' viewpoint of their real-life experiences in learning skill-based subjects via online distance learning were lacking in number. Therefore, a descriptive phenomenological study was used to describe occupational therapy students' personal experiences in studying skill-based subjects via online distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ten undergraduate occupational therapy students were interviewed, ranging from 45 to 60 minutes on their experiences in learning skill-based subjects via online distance learning. The essence of the student's experiences was described in four main themes: (i) the impacts of COVID-19, (ii) adapting to the COVID-19 outbreak, (iii) the downside and upside of learning skill-based subjects via online distance learning and (iv) perceived supports. Even though they struggled to learn the skill-based subjects without hands-on face-to-face sessions, occupational therapy students felt that few strategies effectively enhanced their learning experiences during the period. This study concludes that occupational therapy students formed impactful memories and described their struggles with online distance learning since the sudden transition to ODL during the pandemic. Thus, the experiences highlight a few learning strategies educators can adopt when it comes to skill-based occupational therapy subjects.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy Education, Online Distance Learning, COVID-19, Case-based Learning, Skill-based

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Introduction

Occupational therapy is defined as the therapeutic use of occupations that provides functional support to equip people by overcoming barriers in the recovery process from injury or illness (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020). Occupational therapy promotes independence and satisfaction in all aspects of life. Not only limited to didactic education but there are also many ways to prepare students to become skilled in entry-level occupational therapy including laboratory experiences, problem-based learning, case studies and experiential learning (Goldbach & Stella, 2017). Experiential learning involves hands-on experience in a practical setting to test information learned in educative coursework in a real-life practice environment, emphasizing self-directed learning and mirroring the experience (Thomas et al., 2022). Most students valued hands-on learning since it allowed them to practise and apply learned skills more than ordinary methods such as lectures and self-reading (Thomas et al., 2017).

On January 30, 2020, the emergence of a new coronavirus (2019-nCoV) was announced as a concern public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organization (WHO). An infectious disease has been a major threat to Global public health. In Malaysia, this outbreak resulted in holding back the learning sessions of high institutions during the ongoing semester of pre-university and undergraduate programs (Kamal et al., 2020). To flatten the curve of Covid-19 infection, Movement Control Order (MCO) was imposed starting 18 March 2020. Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education ordered all public and private universities in Malaysia to resume the teaching and learning scheme via Online Distance Learning (ODL) by the end of December 2020. At the edge of July 2021, Malaysia recorded an increased number of cases over the month with the highest of 15,573 new confirmed cases of COVID-19. On that account, face-to-face learning is still not possible.

E-learning has been widely used on account of its accessibility and has been demonstrated to be successful for the past decade. Online learning attempts to provide adaptability to broad-ranging study without its infinite challenges for both the students and instructors (Abe, 2020). However, the whole world quivering with the COVID-19 outbreak and adjusting to the new normal is a challenging process. Obligating to the MCO, higher education institutions must explore online communication platforms to enable interactivity. Even so, this application may be ineffective for certain fields like clinically hands-on or technical education (Moadel et al., 2020). On the 27th of May 2020, Higher Education Ministry in Malaysia declared a must in all universities and higher education centres to administer teaching and learning measures via ODL until the 31st of December 2020, while the decision regarding 2021 was held on based on current cases. Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and only a few exceptions were strictly put in place to halt another COVID-19 outbreak (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021).

Although, unquestionably, ODL is deemed the finest alternative to make certain of continuity in learning in the "new norm" or "during the COVID-19 pandemic", there may be some hindrances such as lack of human touch, sensing students' misreading facial expressions, student engagement and interchange, which can be done more productively in face-to-face learning (Chung et al., 2020). The goal of occupational therapy education is to produce occupational therapists with the essential professional competencies for practice (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2020). These professional competencies can be achieved mostly via laboratory experiences and experiential learning. However, these learning methods are not possible to be conducted during the implementation of MCO in Malaysia. Thus, students have problems learning skills-based subjects which require them to use and experience conducting a wide range of assessment tools and intervention techniques to obtain psychomotor skills. There are limited studies conducted to describe the experiences of occupational therapy students undertaking skill-based subjects via ODL. Given that, this study aimed to explore occupational therapy students' personal experiences in studying skill-based subjects via ODL during the global pandemic, COVID-19.

Method

Design

A descriptive phenomenological inquiry was employed to deal with inner experiences in the everyday life of occupational therapy students studying skill-based subjects via ODL. This method helps to identify the meaning behind the human experience as it related to a phenomenon or notable collective occurrence (Sundler et al., 2019). The phenomenon of interest was the students' experiences in studying skill-based subjects via ODL. The phenomenological foundation of this study aims at attaining a profound understanding of the nature or meaning of students' daily experiences (Mortazavi & Ghardashi, 2021). Therefore, this study aimed to answer the following research questions; what are the experiences of occupational therapy students studying skill-based subjects via ODL? This study was conducted at the Centre for Occupational Therapy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA(UiTM) through one-to-one interviews using semi-structured questionnaires via the google meet platform due to the physical distancing measures imposed to decrease the spread of COVID-19. UiTM Research Ethics Committee approved this study with reference no 600-TNCPI (5/1/6).

Participants

Purposive sampling method was used to recruit the participants in this study. This sampling method offered multiple perspectives both depth and diversity, and the selected respondents were likely to provide information relative to the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Fifteen participants were approached and offered an opportunity to participate in this study based on specific eligibility criteria to obtain rich and thick descriptions of their experiences. Data saturation was not the goal, rather this aimed to get full and rich personal accounts, concepts, and commonalities from the participants. Each person's experiences are so individual that

true data saturation can never really be fully achieved in a phenomenological study (Hale et al., 2008). Occupational therapy students enrolled in a Bachelor of occupational therapy full-time course who; (i) is currently in the second year or above (ii) have taken any occupational therapy skill-based subjects during the COVID-19 pandemic; (iii) can understand English and Malay; and (iv) provide informed consent were included in the study. They were excluded if have not completed the skill-based subjects and refused to be interviewed.

Materials and Instruments

Data was collected using semi-structured individual interviews via the google meet platform. The meetings were audio- and video-recorded for data analysis purposes. Videoconferencing has been popular as a means of communicating regardless of distance. It is a convenient, cheap and efficient way of communication mode. In this new norm, videoconferencing is gaining traction in qualitative research for interviews. The environments allow real-time communication with both audio and video. This is much like a traditional interview, except the researcher and participant are simply in different locations. A laptop with the google meet application and a stable internet connection was required to record the videoconferencing interviews. An interview guide consisting of demographic and main questions was used to collect the data from the participants. The interview guide was developed based on the literature and research objective. Prior to the data collection, it was pilot tested with an occupational therapy student to ensure the clarity and comprehension of the questions.

Data Collection Procedure

Upon receiving ethical approval from the UiTM Research Ethics Committee, data collection was done via videoconferencing interview. An information sheet was provided to the participants and consent was obtained before the interview took place. Participants were made aware of the videoconferencing interview session being recorded for transcription purposes. One day before the interview, a reminder email was sent to the participants. The time and date were set according to the participant's preferences.

The interview started with warm-up questions consisting of demographic details to know more about the students and to get an overall sense of the skill-based subjects that they took. These questions were geared towards the central questions; however, responses helped with the other prompt and probe questions. The COVID-19 question was designed to understand students' general perceptions of the current covid-19 outbreak. Questions on the occupational Therapy course were designed to solicit students' in-detail descriptions of the skill-based subjects for the current semester by looking deep into participants' personal experiences throughout the semester. Participants were interviewed for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim before the data analysis. Data transcribing was conducted in a private room using earphones to avoid the possibility of recordings being heard by other people. Any document which contains the participants' detail was kept with no access to anyone other than the research team. Participants were however, notified that their information would be used for reports and publications.

The Context of the Study

This study explored the experiences of occupational therapy students in learning skill-based subjects via ODL during Movement Control Order (MCO) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students were enrolled in the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA. They have taken skill-based subjects that require hands-on and experiential learning, but it was not possible during COVID-19. Skill-based subjects include pre-clinical and clinical subjects such as occupational therapy assessment, intervention, and practice placement in various areas. During the MCO, face-to-face and hands-on learning were not allowed, which imposed a lot of challenges on the student and educators. The sudden transition required the students and educators to adapt and cope with the new norms.

Data Analysis

Data were thematically analysed using three steps: (i) achieve familiarity with the data through open-minded reading; (ii) search for meanings and themes; and (iii) organise themes into a meaningful wholeness (Sundler et al., 2019). First, the transcripts were read to familiarise with experiences and explore their meanings by identifying the unique and novel sides of the data. Second, notes on the meaning of experiences were made to the transcripts and the notes were compared to develop patterns and themes. Finally, the findings were written and organised with the explicit name of the themes, which describe the meaning of lived experiences in the actual context. The rigour of the study was enhanced using reflexivity, credibility, and transferability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Sundler et al., 2019). The research team compared the derived description with the original data to maintain reflexivity and any changes to the themes were documented and audited throughout the research process (Sundler et al., 2019). Member checking was performed with three participants and the coding was done independently by the two research team members to enhance credibility. The meaning of the experiences was described in the thick description and the context of the study was made clear to ensure the transferability of the findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Findings

Description of Participants

Despite fifteen eligible participants being approached to offer the opportunity to participate in the study, only ten agreed and turned out for the videoconferencing interview. The participants are ten female students aged between 22 and 27 years old (24.1±1.37) residing in different geographical areas during the MCO as shown in Table 1. Five (50%) of them live in rural areas and another five (50%) live in urban areas. The participants were in semester six and eight and were currently taking skill-based subjects as follows; (i) occupational therapy medical-neurological assessment (n=1, 10%), (ii) occupational therapy intervention in medical-neurological conditions (n=4, 40%) and (iii) occupational therapy assessment and intervention in geriatric (n=5, 50%). Despite facing multiple challenges during ODL, almost all participants managed to achieve good to excellent

grades. Participants were also asked to rate satisfaction levels with their performance for the skill-based subjects. The scale ranged from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 10 (very satisfied). Participants rated their satisfaction level from 5 to 8 with a mean and SD of (6.6±1.07).

Table 1. Description of Participants

Pseudonyms	Age	Semester	Geographical Residence	Skill-based subject	Grade	Satisfaction level
NN	24	6	Rural	OT assessment in medical-neurological Conditions	A	8
NI	24	6	Urban		B	7
SZ	24	6	Rural	OT intervention in medical-neurological conditions	B	6
NW	22	6	Rural		A	8
ND	24	6	Urban		B	6
NA	25	8	Rural		B	7
FN	23	8	Rural	OT assessment and intervention in geriatric	B	7
KA	23	8	Urban		A	7
NL	25	8	Urban		B	5
NH	27	8	Rural		C	5

Emerging Themes

Four themes emerged from the analysis; (i) the impacts of COVID-19, (ii) adapting to the COVID-19 outbreak, (iii) the downside and upside of learning skill-based subjects via ODL and (iv) perceived supports as shown in Figure 1. The first theme describes the impacts of COVID-19 on the students and their learning process. The essence of this theme describes how students feel about coronavirus and its spreading. Two subthemes emerged under the first theme namely, (i) uncertainty and fear and (ii) impact on the learning process. The second theme encompasses how participants develop their coping strategies to learn effectively. The essence of this theme relates to students' psychological status which influences their academic performance.

There are two subthemes under the second theme; (i) coping strategies and (ii) psychological influences. The third theme describes the downside and upside of learning via ODL and is arranged in four subthemes; (i) the extent of workload, (ii) technical challenges, (iii) access to technology and (iv) time flexibility and expenses. This theme also discovered students' perceptions of ODL compared to face-to-face classes. The fourth theme explains perceived social supports illustrated by participants during unfortunate times and is organized into two themes; (i) stay connected and (ii) self-efficacy. Participants expressed appreciation for receiving family, friends and faculty members' encouragement and support. in maintaining their academic performance and mental health status.

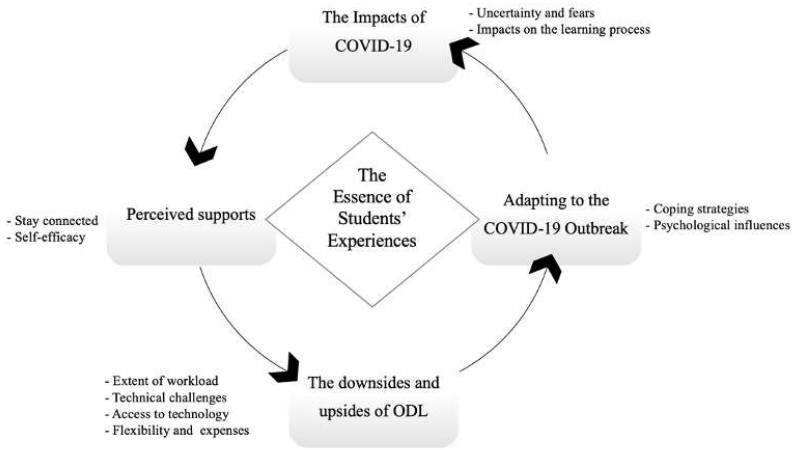

Figure 1. Emerging Themes

Theme 1: The impacts of COVID-19

Uncertainty and Fear. This subtheme incorporates the personal feelings shared by all participants regarding the experience of a yearlong observation on COVID-19. Respondents realized that COVID-19 is a pandemic where the disease outbreak throughout the whole world not only in Malaysia. It affects all populations no matter what age, gender or status. Students also stated that COVID-19 is currently the leading cause of death worldwide up to millions of cases. NN added value to this subtheme by stating:

> "Covid 19 is an airborne disease that cause by a coronavirus that can be transmitted through water droplets when we sneeze or talk. Currently, this disease becoming more dangerous as some sporadic, does not show any symptoms can be tested positive".

As the coronavirus pandemic demonstrated, life can change very quickly and uncertainty about returning to normal social life might result in fear. Some of the students were residing in red zones. Areas classified as "red zones" indicate that the regions where most cases are reported and where individuals are at a high risk of infection. Participants described deep worries and anxiousness in various ways. Most participants highlighted their concerns about the safety of themselves as well as their family members. Two participants stated:

> FN: "I am feeling worried about my parents, nephew and niece because they are at higher risk. If they got infected the symptom will be much worst. I am frustrated because I have not been vaccinated yet but relieved that my parents have completed their vaccination".

> KA: "Covid 19 world widely affected not only our country. It is very dangerous. I think it is so stressful as we have to stay at home and stay away from everyone, by ourselves only with our family and it affected all the entrepreneurs that burden them and cutting off their source of income".

Impact on the learning process. All participants described the values associated with the skill-based subjects. The majority of respondents discussed how they were supposed to be attending lab sessions for the subjects, but they could not. They value the lab sessions as they would be able to physically touch and practice the entire equipment and receive direct guidance from classmates, lecturers and clinical instructors. Participants provided statements relating to what the course plans have changed due to COVID-19. The essence of the students' experiences is exemplified through the following:

> SZ: "Lecturers have planned for a face-to-face session for intervention. We usually do it in lab sessions where the lecturer demonstrates the correct way to conduct the intervention and we get to practice to gain the skill, but it was not possible during MCO".

> KA: "My lecturer also planning to expose more on the reality of that situation with the elderly so that we can apply the theory we learned to the real environment through clinical visits, but it was just a plan. We could go ahead with the plan".

Participants described their experience in comparison with previous hands-on learning at the campus before the emergence of COVID-19. Two participants exemplified that:

> SZ: "For me, the hands-on experience is important because, through that experiential learning, we get to experience how to conduct the intervention physically and how to operate the equipment correctly and giving us confidence when going for clinical placements. For example, some of the interventions require us to use tools such as electrical stimulation so during the lab session it will be really detailed on where to place the electrodes, how to control the electrical impulse, and what intensity to use".

> NL: "When in an online session, not everyone can pay 100% attention during lectures and presentations with internet problems, so I think it is difficult to pay full attention. We only get to learn hands-on skills using videos. We don't get to feel the real situation, the experience of doing so is not available".

Participants expressed that COVID-19 has altered their learning process from formal methods to a new norm of using ODL. ODL is an instructive system where students carry out class sessions through video recordings, live video conferencing, or any other audio/visual technology medium. Participants provided value statements relating to the changes. They make the best use of the technology available by implementing miscellaneous teaching and learning modes like social media (WhatsApp, Telegram), live video conferences (Google Meet) and pre-recorded lecture videos (YouTube). Participants stated that:

> NH: "My lecturer does google meet sessions or zoom or provided us with recorded lectures. We also do presentations among students online. Most of us use google meet as a medium for classes and group discussion".

SZ: "We were not allowed to go back to campus. So that is why the lecturer provide us with video demonstrations of carrying assessments and interventions".

Theme 2: Adapting to the COVID-19 outbreak

Coping strategies. Students learned to adapt to the changes in the learning process with their own coping strategies as that was the only option to complete their studies. All participants have somehow used similar learning strategies to adapt to the changes. The students advocate that staying organized can ease the process. The habitual "structure" of daily life may have been replaced with a new norm, so strategies could help in optimizing learning and managing time effectively. Identifying learning objectives and goals will help to stay on track by taking note of what they hope to accomplish by the end of the course. Besides, developing a study plan and having a written coherent plan allowed them to follow and complete the course. Along with taking time to eat or relax, participants also set aside some specific time for learning. Participants illustrated their coping strategies as follows:

NH: "Whenever the class schedule came out in the early semester, I will plan my schedule for the whole week, what goal I need to achieve for that day, I prioritize which assignments needed to be submitted first. I think I am adapting to it".

NN: "I used my planner and write down the assignments because sometimes I cannot remember everything. I adapt mainly by trying to complete the assignment earlier. So, I will not be so burdened at the end".

FN: "I take note of the extra information and do a lot of own reading before class so that I have questions to ask during class on things I don't understand".

Apart from staying organized, participants also suggested optimizing learning efficiency by having a dedicated study space. Participants build a distraction-free area where they feel comfortable studying. Participants also merge their learning time into their routines to enhance productivity. This is exemplified by:

SZ: "How I adapt is by having my own personal corner for my online class so that I can fully concentrate. I called mine a 'battlefield' because a lot of battles happened there".

Psychological Influences. Although adapting well to the changes in the learning process, most participants agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted their lives from multiple directions. Despite coming to the end phase of their education (clinical placements) and progressing to the next level (employment), they were not confident with themselves. NW stated that:

> "I am afraid that I could not gain a full understanding of assessment and intervention and will cause a lot of problems during my clinical placement. Hands-on give me experience. So, without experience, I don't think that I am confident enough to conduct the assessment and intervention on real patients".

> NL: "After the MCO, we get the chance to go to clinical placement at University Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC) where the first day I got really shocked like I have a lot of lacking in experience. Every day was tough for us because if we don't have those skills".

In addition to having to cope with a stressful study environment, participants have to fulfil roles while living at home. In comparison to studying on campus, students were responsible for taking care of their own well-being. While living at home, students have to worry about looking after family's needs. Two participants describe their responsibility other than being a student:

> ND: "I divided my time between studies and my family. You know especially as a woman we need to do house chores and a lot more, so I really need to follow my schedule. If not, I will be left behind".

> NW: "Because we are at home, we have other responsibilities, we could not just stay in front of the laptop and do all the coursework from morning until night. We have other things, like living with family. We can't focus only on studying. It is hard to adapt. But of course, I have to, I have no choice so I just go with the flow and do whatever I can".

Theme 3: The downside and upsides of ODL

Extent of workload. Most participants believe that the amount of work in ODL was increased than during traditional classes. Some participants agreed that the increase in workload was due to the replacement of final examinations and lab sessions. Participants described that:

> NL: "During ODL, the coursework load increases. Not only a single subject has a lot of assignments, but mostly all. With my home environment, it really gives pressure on me. The workload is increases compared to face-to-face. During face-to-face, there were more classes but fewer assignments. To be honest I prefer the final examination just because of too much workload"

> NW: "Many workloads, and I think it is very much compared to face-to-face. I have to do many things at once and I have to cope since there are many subjects so the workload and there are assignments for each subject."

Participants expressed experiencing difficulties in keeping up with their daily occupational performance due to the unbearable amount of academic workload they carry. Participants recollected:

KA: “When it comes to sleep, it is a problem. I have to stay up late finishing all the coursework. At some point, I cannot sleep because I keep on having and struggling with my negative thoughts. My leisure is also affected as at campus every day after class around 6 pm, I spend time jogging or playing badminton with my friends. During ODL, I rarely continue my leisure activities”.

NW: “During ODL, my eating time was disrupted. Because I want to settle my assignment first because I know that after I eat, I will do something else because I could not focus anymore. So, it is better for me to complete my assignment first and then do other things later”.

Technical challenges. All traditional methods operated for direct learning; classrooms, halls, lecture rooms, and laboratories must now be put back and replaced with the high-modernization of online learning. Participants made use of the “network problem” to describe the technical difficulties. Six participants were residing in rural areas during the pandemic. Participants further described the technical challenges causing them sometimes miss lectures or cannot join the live discussion. Participants exemplified that:

NW: “I have trouble with my internet. Some lecturers used recorded video as their medium. I think it is a good alternative for us who are having trouble with the internet because the time is flexible; we can watch the video when we have time or when the internet is stable. But the hardest part is that if we cannot understand something, there is no Q&A session because it is recorded video”.

ND: “The internet depends on the weather. The internet is the main problem in ODL because we cannot control those things and sometimes it takes time for us to complete recording videos or submitting assignments because of the internet connection issue”.

Accessibility of technology. Even though participants experienced challenges because of ODL implementation, there were some advantages to them. When asked what the upsides of ODL were, participants seem to be holding back and needed prompting. They stated that they got the opportunity to venture into new knowledge by using various online applications as mediums of discussion and sharing information. Participants described that:

NH: “We get access to new technologies and applications that can be used during online learning such as google meet, zoom, for use during our presentation. Sometimes we also use quizzes, google form and many more”.

SZ: “The good part is students get to assess the learning materials as much as they want until they really understand the topic because it is being recorded. It is cool, right? Because if we don’t understand or forget, we get to revise. In physical class, you did not get the chance because the lecturer only taught in the class”.

NW: “I am satisfied with all the presentations by my friends and lecturers because they are very clear.

The video demonstration from YouTube gave me a better understanding of how to conduct the specific assessment and intervention. I would say that is what helps me during the ODL".

Flexibility and expenses. Participants perceived another advantage of ODL is its flexibility to choose wherever or whenever they want to study. Participants get the possibility of saving a significant amount of money as the expenses for ODL was lesser than face-to-face on-campus. Also saving time by not commuting on crowded buses or local trains. Participants explained that:

NL: "I get to save a lot of money and the most important thing is that I feel safe living at home. If we live on the campus, we are exposed to COVID-19, interacting with people there. I also get to spend all of the time with my family".

FN: "I can save money from paying college fees, food and leisure bills because I tend to spend much when I am on campus by going out with my friends".

Theme 4: Perceived support

Stay connected. Participant transcriptions were found to have a consistent thread where all of them were receiving support from their peers, family, lecturers, and university. Participants claimed that online studying leads to feelings of loneliness. In a situation where they no longer have access to a friendly-study environment or the chance to physically unite with their peers. Staying connected can keep the participants motivated. Participants found comfort by interacting with classmates via virtual study groups. These sentiments explain the subtheme:

NL: "I would say my classmates, specifically my groupmates. We helped each other because we understand how this impacted our studies and mental health. Everyone is stressing out but at least by having them, they can listen to my rantings and make me relieved".

ND: "Whenever I am stress, I tend to cry and express to my sister and friends. They will help by advising and comforting me so I can stand on my feet again. If I did not have support, I will collapse and burn out easily".

NH: "Our lecturers were helpful. Sometimes they asked about our current situation, whether our internet connection is okay for class, and whether we needed extra help. They channel us to any support provided by the university".

SZ: "I can see that many webinars have been done to address students' issues, for example how to manage stress, manage time and so on".

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behaviour,

and social environment. To boost self-efficacy, social support was found to be the key feature. Most participants expressed receiving support as a significant factor that motivates them to perform better in academics. Two participants stated that:

> NL: "It was challenging to adapt to the new norm learning environment. I need a lot of support from others. If I have no support, I believe that my performance will deteriorate because the support motivates me to complete my studies".
>
> NW: "I believe that if I don't have good groupmates who are supportive, I don't think I go through this. I get to achieve good grades too since most of the assignments are in the group. If they did not cooperate, it will be harder".

Discussion

This study aimed to explore occupational therapy students' personal experiences in studying skill-based subjects via ODL during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first theme illustrates the impacts of COVID-19 on the participants' life and their learning process. The focal point of participants' experiences is mainly the uncertainty and fear of the pandemic. Most participants are suffering from the uncertainty of returning to normal life and a deep fear of infection, with substantial worry for the elderly of their families. The traumatic feeling is supported by the fact that the number of morbidity and mortality in Malaysia keeps increasing as reported by the Ministry of Health (Din et al., 2021). A study stated that undoubtedly undergraduate students encounter obstacles and psychological stress because of quarantine obligations, finishing-off studies via ODL, and future employment uncertainties (Kassim et al., 2021).

The enforcement of MCO halted the conventional learning process (Rumeli et al., 2022). Thus, ODL is viewed as the best solution for replacing conventional learning methods during this uncertain situation. Most educators delivered the learning content through online platforms such as video recordings, video conferencing, or any other audio/visual technology medium. Professional practice education was applied by the university as recommended by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists to employ virtual teaching in occupational therapy education (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2020). Despite adapting to the new norm in their learning process, participants value more conventional learning methods to enhance their skills and clinical competency. Successful learning was established using (1) experience in authentic contexts, (2) a supportive mentor system, (3) structured portfolio use, and (4) formative and summative assessment (Aukes et al., 2008), which are applied during experiential learning.

The second theme describes how the students adapt to COVID-19 during their educational journey. This theme centred on a consistent thread where participants develop any means of coping strategies to adapt to the situation and how it influences the students' psychological status and academic performance. Participants advocate their efforts to improve their own knowledge, skills, accomplishments, and personal development in learning skill-

based subjects. Participants committed to the efforts by staying organized, prioritizing tasks, practising self-directed learning, and taking a break when necessary. These are among the coping strategies they used to adapt to the situation. Participants employed self-directed learning take control over the conceptualization, design, implementation, and evaluation of their learning process. A study stated that individuals who do self-directed learning will show dedication to learning with increased motivation and engagement in online learning (Sandars et al., 2020).

Participants describe their feeling of distress as the COVID-19 outbreak has affected their lives as students through various means. Participants express anxiousness about having to fulfil other responsibilities at home eventually causing psychological tolls on them. A study found that 67.1% out of 486 respondents of university students in Malaysia feel stress during the COVID-19 pandemic (Al-Kumaim et al 2020). Therefore, a study suggests considering mobile mental care apps as an effective and efficient way to access mental care, particularly during a pandemic because students prefer mobile apps over face-to-face consultation (Marques et al., 2021). Students are also encouraged to practise personal reflection in expectation of guarded exploration and experience, hence developing a sense of the convenience of steady functioning, learning and development (Aukes et al., 2008).

The third theme represents the downsides and upsides of learning skill-based subjects via ODL. Participants revealed that ODL posed several challenges. Students express the unbearable extent of the study workload during the ODL was conducted. These findings align with a study that found 69.5% of respondents felt an overload of work during the COVID-19 pandemic (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021). This was acknowledged by the participants expressing that an increased workload results in the hassle to keep up with day-to-day activities such as disruption in sleep pattern, cessation of leisure activity and physical strains due to prolonged sitting.

Participants, especially those living in rural areas found that trying to stay connected to the internet was challenging. ODL has a growing interdependence with technology. Therefore, common issues in remote areas are a lack of electricity and internet access serve as barriers to acquiring stable internet (Kanwar et al., 2018). ODL relied heavily on modern technology. Participants expressed that poor internet connectivity results in delayed access to learning materials. Network issues were also evidently experienced by the educators, not just the students (Kop, 2020). Weak signals often interrupt the smooth flow during the class session that includes audio broke, video freeze or there was a lag in communication in the online class. Thus, it causes miscommunication and losing focus among the students. These challenges resonate with participants' choice of embracing face-to-face conventional learning.

Some of the participants needed prompting on what went well, showing that the upsides of ODL were underseen as they perceived more challenges in ODL. Regardless of the downsides, participants value and make use of the various technology available. Participants take the opportunity to discover new online applications for online meetings, learning, conference, and others. The convenience of technology allows lecturers to record the class sessions so that students get to review when needed. A study reported that as long as students have access to a

computer, online classes are possible to be attended by students from any location and at any time (Purwanto, 2020). Participants perceived the advantage of ODL is its flexibility and reduce expenses. ODL allows them to plan their learning independently at any location and time. Additionally, studying from home during ODL allows the students to save their travel time to and from the class giving them a chance to use the time for meaningful activities.

The fourth theme evolved around perceived social support. Staying connected with family and friends provides emotional relief during an episode of distress. The general benefits (GB) model of social support proposes individuals' psychological states, such as positive affect and sense of well-being can be enhanced with social support (Rueger et al., 2016). Participants were also grateful for the presence of faculty members with the effort of channelling any emotional or financial support. A study conducted has proved that social support is a pronounced component to foresee university students' academic accomplishment (Alsubaie et al., 2019). Since all participants received strong social support, it was believed that the reason for achieving good to excellent grades. A systematic review with meta-analysis reported a promising correlation between social support with university students' grade point average (GPA). Given that, not receiving social support contributes to the deterioration of psychological health, academic performance and overall quality of life of students (Mishra, 2020).

Conclusion

There were limited studies that explored the experiences of occupational therapy students studying skill-based subjects via ODL. As one of the research team members was undergoing the same situation, the lack of exploration on this matter drove her interest. The findings revealed four themes to represent the essence of students' experiences: (i) the impacts of COVID-19, (ii) adapting to the COVID-19 outbreak, (iii) the downside and upside of learning skill-based subjects via online distance learning and (iv) perceived supports. Although participants adapted well to the ODL, they emphasised the importance of skill-based subjects to be delivered through conventional learning methods. This study concludes that undergraduate occupational therapy students formed impactful memories despite struggling to study skill-based subjects via ODL. The findings of the study highlight the need for thorough learning strategies to ensure better satisfaction and prevent psychosocial deterioration among students.

Recommendations

There are a few limitations of this study. Above all, the sample was relatively small despite having a thick and rich description of data. The findings of the study may not be transferable to other countries given the differences in context, accommodation, and facilities. Thus, transferring the findings of the study should be made with caution. A larger qualitative study is required to explore the issues and should focus more on how the students want to be helped in the learning process while taking skill-based subjects. This study highlights the

need of (i) the university to look at the quality of the online learning platform and resources, (ii) educators to modernize and restructure their teaching schemes according to the new norm and (iii) attending students' psychological distress to promote the healthy learning process.

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