

Psychological Challenges Faced by Freshmen University Students in Zimbabwe During Covid-19. A Case Study of a University in Harare

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ABSTRACT

The psychological health of university students has attracted the attention of many scholars and university administrators across the world. The COVID-19 pandemic is considered to have worsened the psychological wellbeing of student due to its persistent disruption of life, financial security and learning in most parts of the world. This study focused on the psychological health of university students in Zimbabwe, focusing on a university in Harare. The research focused on freshmen students, a group that has received little attention in empirical literature. Its specific objectives were to ascertain the psychological challenges faced by undergraduate freshman at a university in Harare during the COVID-19 pandemic, to establish the causes of psychological morbidity among undergraduate freshman at a university in Harare during the COVID-19 pandemic and to find out what must be done to improve the psychological health of freshmen university students in Zimbabwe. The research used a case study research design that was anchored on a qualitative research approach to come up with its findings. Data was collected from 30 freshmen students using focus group discussions (FDGs) and from 6 members of staff from the Students Affairs Department. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the research data. The results of the study indicated that depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and intention, eating disorders and drug and substance abuse were among the major psychological challenges facing freshmen students during COVID-19. It was found out that the main factors causing these challenges included difficulties adjusting to the financial distress, new environment and new life, separation from family and friends, uncertainty and fear of the future and lack of sleep. The research thus recommended the need to reintroduce student grants, institute dedicated psychological health programmes for freshmen students and the need for student to adopt positive coping mechanisms as strategies to enhance the psychological wellbeing and quality of life of freshmen university students in Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION

Young individuals enter a period of transition when they enrol in college. Making independent decisions about their lives and studies, handling money, adjusting to the academic demands of an unstructured learning environment, and interacting with a wide variety of new people are just a few of the new challenges that students face during this transition (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). Bewick et al. (2010) noted that during this transition, the majority of students frequently venture outside of their comfort zones and leave their homes for the first time. These difficulties could have a negative impact on college students' mental health and lead to psychological illness. There is evidence that students' psychological wellness suffers after they enrol in college (Auerbach et al., 2018; Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020; Joan et al., 2018); the

Covid-19 pandemic has created a new atmosphere that has made it necessary to re-examine the problems surrounding freshmen's psychological morbidity in a university setting. This was the impetus for doing an empirical study that examined the present psychological morbidity issues affecting undergraduate freshman students in Zimbabwe.

Background

Poor mental health management in institutions of higher learning has been a source of concern around the world. Concerns have arisen after it has been noticed that many students in higher education institutions, in particular those in physical sciences exhibit poor mental health behaviours and emotional distress leading to high incidence of substance and drug abuse (Bergan et al., 2021). In developed countries such as the United States, interest in psychological morbidity and well-being of university students has been growing in the last few decades. It has been noted that while issues of psychological morbidity are increasing, very few of the patients obtain access to treatment, particularly among those in remote areas (American Council on Education (ACE), 2019). In Asia as well, mental health problems among tertiary level students have been a bone of contention for a very long time. According to Prajapati and Sharma (2017), issues to do with global warming, famines, poverty, and population explosion, drug abuse and sexual abuse have been blamed for the deterioration of students' psychological wellbeing in the continent. In African countries too there are growing numbers of students arriving on college campuses who represent a wide array of psychological morbidity challenges and diagnoses ranging from substance and drug abuse, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation (De Sousa et al., 2020). The scenario is even worse in countries like Zimbabwe where political conflict, economic malaise and family breakdowns often expose already existing vulnerabilities to psychological health complications (Kidia et al., 2017).

Most scholars, including Sodi et al. (2021) contend that there seem to be a confluence of factors and unique situations that bring about challenges to mental health among tertiary level students. In support of this, previous studies have identified academic pressure, demanding workloads, economic and financial concerns, social networking, and class struggle among the major causes of psychological morbidities among students in tertiary education (Joan et al., 2018). Psychological morbidity issues are very detrimental to the welfare of students in tertiary education. This is in tandem with Antaramian (2015)'s study which discovered that psychological morbidity among students may adversely affect their academic performance and quality of life, and that it may also contribute to drug abuse, decreased empathy, and academic dishonesty. The seriousness of these negative outcomes warrant the need for a deep seated understanding of the prevalence of mental health problems and their antecedents, so that effective programmes can be designed that are able to respond to difficult situations and maintain good mental well-being.

The disruption of life globally by the COVID-19 pandemic during the period 2020-2021 put the mental health of tertiary level students under stress, exacerbating an already tense situation. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the learning of students globally and many universities worldwide moved to blended learning environments with minimal face to face interaction and more learning time being delivered via online platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic and the new normal brought a blended way of learning posing new challenges that had potential devastating effects on psychological morbidity among students. This is concurred by Hernández-Torrano et al. (2020), pointing out that the scenario induced a lot of pressure on financial resources and anxiety among the students. The blended way of learning was a particular challenge to vulnerable groups, such as those from poor families and those located in remote regions as they could not obtain uninterrupted access to the internet and mobile technologies.

At the same time physical distancing measures instituted by governments across the world had severe effects as it limited practices and activities that people normally use to cope with stress such as socialising, attending mass entertainment events and visiting recreational facilities, which added a burden on the mental

health prospects of people (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2020). There have been studies conducted on the effects of COVID-19 and lockdowns on college students, and most have reported significant adverse effects on the students' psychological well-being and quality of life (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). However most of these studies have been carried out in developed and emerging economies, with little attention on Zimbabwe and other developing countries in Africa. In addition, no particular emphasis has been placed on freshmen students who are a special case as they are confronted by unique challenges including adjusting to the new learning environment. It was thus imperative to undertake a study on the psychological health challenges faced by freshmen students in Zimbabwe, so that effective policies could be implemented to safeguard to the mental wellbeing of tertiary students in all scenarios, including crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Objectives

The main purpose of the study was to understand the psychological challenges facing freshmen students in Zimbabwe, focusing on a university in Harare. The specific objectives were;

1. To understand the mental health problems faced by undergraduate freshman at a university in Harare during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To explore the causes of psychological morbidity among undergraduate freshman at a university in Harare during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To explore what must be done to improve the psychological health of freshmen university students in Zimbabwe

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a qualitative research approach as it enabled it to come up with detailed descriptions of psychological health problems among freshmen university students in Zimbabwe. The qualitative approach encouraged respondents to share more about themselves and their perceptions, thus enabling the study to fully fulfil its objectives. A case study research design was used in the study as it allowed the collection of comprehensive descriptive data about psychological health issues at the university in Harare. The target population of the study consisted of all first year students during the academic year 2020-2021, as well as all staff members at the Students Affairs Department at the university in Harare who acted as key informants. Purposive sampling was used to select samples for the study. This was because it allowed the selection of participants who were as willing to participate as they had relevant knowledge about the research phenomenon.

Data was collected from students using focus group discussions (FDGs). The FDGs helped ensure that respondents felt relaxed participating in group discussion than one on one interviews. On the other hand semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from key informants. The semi-structured interviews allowed for greater procedural flexibility, as the researcher could probe and obtain explanations when deemed essential, thus obtaining detailed information about the perceptions and perspectives of the research participants. In overall terms the two methods of collecting data were instrumental in coming up with reliable research findings. Thus the responses of the students were triangulated with the perspectives of students' affairs staff in order to ensure that the results of the study were dependable. Similarly the use of FDGs in conjunction with interviews also helped triangulate the research findings, in so doing buttressing the reliability of the study.

The research data was analysed using thematic analysis. The recorded data was transcribed into text and perused through to identify patterns, then coded accordingly. Themes were then extracted from the coded and sub-themes were identified. The data was presented using tables and direct quotations to ensure better appreciation of the perceptions and opinions expressed by the participants.

The research targeted 14 students and 6 Student Affairs Department staff members. Table 1 below shows response rate.

Table 1: Response Rate

	Targeted Sample	Responded	Response rate (%)
Students	14	10	71.4
Staff	6	6	100.0
Total	20	16	80.0

The table above shows the response rate. The targeted population was 20 participants, however, other participants excused themselves or failed to make it on time for the interviews and the researcher ended up working with 16 participants which is about 80%. The response rate did not reduce the sample significantly and also those who did not turn up were not part of the key informants therefore did not affect the process.

The respondents were made up of 2 distinct groups, students and staff. Out of the 16 respondents 10 were students and the remaining 6 were the key informants from the students' affairs department. Of the 10 students who participated, 4 were male and 6 were female. In terms of staff participants, five were females and one was male, reflecting the gender split within the department. Table 4.2 indicates the demographic characteristics of the students that took part in the study.

Table 2 Characteristics of Key Informants

Respondent	Gender	Age	Area of specialisation	Technical Experience (years)	Tenure of employment (years)
Key informant 1	Male	46 Years	Religion and Spirituality	18	12
Key informant 2	Female	33 Years	Public Health	9	3
Key informant 3	Female	41 Years	Psychology	14	9
Key informant 4	Male	53 Years	Administration	25	10
Key informant 5	Female	28 Years	Psychology	4	4
Key informant 6	Male	31 Years	Sport and Recreation	6	4

RESULTS

Mental Health Problems Faced by Freshmen University Students during COVID-19

From data obtained from the primary research involving students and key informants, a number of themes emerged on the mental health problems first year students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and intent, eating disorders and drug and substance abuse.

Depression

The majority of the students indicated that they suffered from depression during the pandemic while they

were trying to continue pursuing their academic careers. Most of the students who took part in the study complained of a number of symptoms commonly associated with depression including difficulties in concentration, abnormal mood swings, sleep difficulties, changes in appetite, and/or headaches and/or body pains that could not be attributed to any actual illness. According to one of the students,

“In addition to struggling to focus on and complete schoolwork, I was having trouble understanding what I was reading and finding it difficult to apply what I was learning.”

These sentiments also tallied with those expressed by the key informants who noted depression among the most common psychological health problems facing freshmen students during the pandemic. The key informants noted that quite a number of students exhibited worrying behaviours and attitudes linked to depression such as feelings of despair, hopelessness, and/or impotence, changes in social behaviour including withdrawing from others and isolating oneself. In the words of one medical staff at the University Clinic, *“these students displayed extreme sadness or anger over a failed relationship in their lives to the point of contemplating on suicide or death.”*

Anxiety

Focus group discussions with students indicated that most of them suffered from anxiety during the pandemic period. Many of them reported difficulties concentrating, dizziness, muscle discomfort and tension, migraines, and other stomach-related issues. These results indicated high levels of anxiety among the students. The major source of anxiety as reported by most students was about their academic future. In particular they worried about whether or not they would be able to finish their education given the harmful effects of the pandemic and the general socio-economic malaise in the country. This was especially illustrated by one of the FDG participants who stated that, *“we are anxious about our academic future, if we will be able to finish our studies considering the costs and challenges we are facing right at the beginning of the program.”*

In addition, they FDG participants also expressed grave concern about their future career prospects in an economic environment characterised by poor economic growth and high unemployment levels. In the words of one of the students, *“I am worried about my career, if I have made the right career decision, if I will find jobs after completing the studies.”*

Interviews with key informants also revealed that anxiety was among the major psychological health problems facing freshmen students at the university. Insights from Student Affairs staff indicated that most students had difficulties coping with stressful experiences brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent government containment measures. The key informants also revealed that most of the students who sought counselling reported an overwhelming fear of failure as well as feelings of tension and panic. In supporting these perceptions, one of the counsellors quoted one student who sought counselling as saying, *“I have the impression that I am suffocating, that I am a burden to those around me, and that there is no reason for me to continue.”*

Suicidal ideation and intent

Suicidal ideation and intent was also found among the mental health problems faced by freshmen students. A sizeable number of students in the FDGs stated that during the pandemic they experienced stress, frustration, and uncertainty, coupled by all the pressures of excelling and progressing in their academic studies. The FDGs also indicated that some freshmen students became so overwhelmed to the extent of thinking about taking their own lives, with one or two even doing it. In expressing this scenario, one of the FDG participants narrated that,

“My close buddy Peter all of a sudden started giving away valued items, retreated from friends and family, for some inexplicable reason started visiting people to talk about how he was no longer able to make it in life, and started searching online for information about how to commit suicide. At first I thought he was making a joke about hanging himself, but he ended up doing it.”

At the same time interviews with key informants from the Students Affairs Department identified suicidal ideation as a recurring theme among the psychological health problems that affected students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Medical staff who took part in the study noted their patients’ experiences with a wide range of emotions, such as anxiety, irritation, and a loss of interest in activities that they had previously found enjoyable, as well as shame, fury, and melancholy, all of which are associated with suicidal ideation.

Eating disorders

Eating disorders also featured prominently among the major themes discussed during the FDGs. Majority of the participants reported noticing or experiencing a number of signs and symptoms, including eating a lot of food in a very short space of time. This was especially noted by one participant who recounted that, *“I noticed that I ate food and don’t remember it and at times wanted to stop eating but could not stop. Food was becoming a tool to comfort, numb or distract me from any emotional pain being felt.”* In addition some of the participants reported suddenly losing interest in foods that they used to adore. One case in point was one of the FDG participants who mentioned that, *“The vast majority of the time, I would throw up after eating any meal, and I would eventually resort to using mints after trips to the bathroom or perfume to cover the odour of my throw up.”* Other reported noticing their friends taking excessive exercise and dietary measures to lose. For example a student stated that, *“I observed that Ray seemed preoccupied with, or otherwise dissatisfied with, his weight and the contour of his physique. He started working out far more than he should have, to the point that he had problems taking breaks from his workouts.”*

Drug and substance abuse

Drug and substance abuse further emerged from the FDGs as a major psychological health problem that proliferated among freshmen university students during the pandemic. During the FDGs, it was uncovered that some of the freshmen students abused drugs and substances to relieve stress or suppress difficulties. This means that the problem of drug and substance abuse emerged a negative coping mechanism utilised by the freshmen students to deal with the difficulties they faced learning during the pandemic. In illustrating this notion, one of the FDG participants revealed that, *“My use of hallucinogens increased my spirituality, which in turn led to enhanced emotional stability and less symptoms of anxiety, sadness, and disordered eating. Hallucinogens are a gateway drug.”* The FDGs went on to indicate that substance and drug abuse was a very serious problem as several students had stopped participating in extracurricular activities or in their schoolwork while their lives centered on the consumption of alcohol or illicit drugs.

Causes of Psychological Morbidities among Freshmen Undergraduate Students during COVID-19

The research also sought to determine the major causes of psychological morbidities among the freshmen university students. The main themes that emerged in answering the research question included new environment and new challenges, lack of sleep, uncertainty and fear of the future as well as financial pressure.

New environment and new challenges

One of the major challenges leading to psychological distress reported by the students was concerned difficulties adjusting to their new way of life on campus. Most of them noted challenges adjusting with hectic schedules and high workloads. In addition some mentioned that they faced difficulties living with new people from different backgrounds and with different behaviours and attitudes. In expressing these

challenges, one of the students complained that, *“My roommate spends most of his time talking with his friends and blasting their radios to the point where I can’t concentrate or even sleep.”*

Similarly the majority of the key informants who took part in interviews identified challenges coping with the new environment among the major factors causing psychological morbidity challenges among the freshmen students. They pointed out that these students were meeting new people, figuring out how to fit in, forming an independent identity, handling adult duties, and at times making some poor judgments along the road, which was the contribution that the senior member of staff made. According to the medical staff, *“successfully navigating through all of these changes requires cognitive maturity and life skills that many people in this age group are still mastering. Furthermore, to add salt to an already bleeding injury, there is typically palpable pressure to do well and greater competition from other students at the university”*.

Lack of sleep

Students reported that their time of sleeping was very limited which contributed to their psychological distress. They revealed that the excessive consumption of caffeine products, drinking well into the middle of the night and drug abuse were negatively affecting their sleeping time. According to one of the FDG participants, *“there is a flurry of activity at the university, such as excessive consumption of caffeine, parties, and possibly abuse of drugs and alcohol. All of these factors contribute to make it difficult to achieve healthy sleeping habits, which in turn make it difficult for people to concentrate in class”*.

Uncertainty and fear of the future

The FDG participants also discussed issues to do with uncertainties in both their current lives as well as their future. Some expressed fear over uncertainties about how they were going to pay their student loans while others feared they would face difficulties obtaining employment due to the high unemployment rate among the graduate youths in the country. Some went as far as to be uncertain over their future marital lives as graduates, in most cases to fear of pressure from parents and immediate family members. In the words of one of the FDG participants,

“I’m not sure what kind of woman I’ll marry because I’ve seen the behaviour of these university girls with ‘Blessers,’ and I wouldn’t be comfortable taking a graduate as my wife, but my parents are so proud of me being the clan’s first graduate that they have a stereotype of a graduate woman they expect me to marry.”

Financial pressure

Students during the discussions highlighted that another main cause of stress among university students is financial pressure. One of the students said, *“Over the last decade, the cost of education has increased and us as students, we are finding it difficult to handle the pressure of dealing with high student loans to finance our education.”*

Separation from the support system of family and friends

Interviews with key informants further indicated that separation from the support system of family and friends was one of the causes of psychological distress among the students. They explained that leaving home for the first time was likely to have a negative impact on confidence among the students as they move away from people who normally supported them morally and reinforced their self-crafted identities. Additionally freshmen students were likely to feel lonely and isolated due to being in unfamiliar places with a lot of unfamiliar people. In explaining this scenario, one of the key informants stated that, *“Adjusting to life in college becomes particularly challenging for students who do not have their typical support structure. This, combined with intense feelings of isolation and longing for home, increases the likelihood that students will experience anxiety.”*

Discussion

The research findings indicated that both the students and the student affairs staff members agreed that depression was one of the major mental health problems faced by freshmen students during the COVID-19 pandemic. These results are in line with Franzoi (2022) who indicated that most tertiary level students in Europe suffered depression as a result of the confluence of social containment, financial distress and the interruption of their learning during the pandemic. In addition the findings showed that anxiety was a common psychological challenge among the students during the pandemic. This is consistent with Hernández-Torrano et al. (2020) noting that the disruption of life and the uncertainties associated with the pandemic was a major cause of anxiety among students in universities.

Suicidal ideation and intent was also reported by both FDG and interview participants among the mental health problems among the students. Cases of suicide have often been reported in many universities in Africa, which is a clear sign of the severity of psychological distress and pressure within institution of higher learning in the continent (Bashir et al., 2020). This implies the need for concrete efforts to promote good mental health and quality of life among students in tertiary academic institutions. Eating disorders also featured prominently among the major themes discussed during the FDGs. This was a clear manifestation of anxiety and stress among the freshmen students. This is supported by Nitsch et al. (2021) who also found eating disorders among the major psychological challenges facing university students. Furthermore the results of the study revealed severe challenges with drug and substance abuse among the students. This is also consistent with previous findings including those by Herrero. (2019). Drug and substance abuse is a negative coping mechanism which suggests the absence or inadequacy of mental health programmes at the university.

The research also identified a number of factors responsible for the proliferation of psychological morbidities among freshmen students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among these were the new environment and new challenges that freshmen students were exposed to as a result of them moving on to a new level of education with modalities than high school education. These findings agree with Chaló (2017) postulating that freshmen students would encounter difficulties adjusting to a new way of live, new surrounding and more demanding academic workloads. In addition the majority of the students who participated in FDGs noted lack of sleep among the main causes of psychological distress. This scenario indicated the presence of lux regulations on the movements of students during the night at the campus. Joan et al. (2018) agree with this, asserting the importance of ensuring health resting and sleeping habits among students in tertiary educational institutions.

Also, majority of the students indicated that they faced uncertainties about their future which caused a lot of anxiety among most of them. This is consistent with findings by Clemente-Suárez et al. (2020) which indicated that the pandemic brought about a lot of uncertainties due to numerous changes that were instituted in government containment measures, which threatened to derail proper learning in universities. Additionally financial pressure was identified among the major stressors among freshmen students during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings support findings from many studies on the psychological effects of COVID-19, including Cao (2021) in China. Separation from family and friends was further highlighted in FDGs among the major causes of psychological morbidities among the freshmen students. A possible reason for this scenario is poor student orientation programmes which have little emphasis on how new students would cope with their new life on campus. This is castigated by Bergin et al. (2015), advocating for dedicated psychological health programmes targeting freshmen students in universities.

CONCLUSION

Freshmen university students face a myriad of mental health problems that are often unique from those

experienced students at higher levels. Depression, anxiety, eating disorders and drug and substance abuse are very common among freshmen students as they struggle coping with their new ways of living. This was particularly the case during the COVID-19 pandemic which so large scale interruption of learning, containment and isolation as well disruptions in livelihoods and financial distress. The study indicated that, apart from financial distress and lack of sleep due to over-indulgence in late night entertainment, difficulties adjusting to the new environment and separation from loved ones were key factors leading to psychological morbidities among the freshmen university students. These results suggest the need to psychologically prepare freshmen students in an adequate manner through programmes that ensure that they are able to easily adjust to their new lives and main high levels of mental wellbeing and quality of life.

Recommendations

The research came up with a number of recommendations on what should be done in order to improve the psychological wellbeing and protect the quality of life of freshmen university students. It recommended that;

1. Student grants must be reintroduced in order to relieve pressure on students who may be worried about their next meal, school fees, or rent for those who will be staying off campus.
2. Universities must reduce the academic load of students in the first semester of their first year to ensure they settle into their academic career with a limited load because they already have other issues outside of the classrooms
3. Universities should develop wellness programs and awareness workshops to teach freshmen students how to cope with their new life and manage stress effectively.
4. Universities should improve their management of counselling students by incorporating the use of peer counsellors, increasing the number of counselling rooms and personnel who attend to the counselling needs.
5. Students should adopt positive coping mechanisms, including discussing and seeking advice from others, seeking counselling from professionals and the university and adopting good physical health behaviours.

Suggestions for further research

The research was very instrumental in exploring psychological morbidity issues faced by freshmen university students in Zimbabwe. Therefore further research should extend this study to include all universities in the country in order to better understand the phenomenon and design effective measures to foster mental wellbeing and better quality of life for students in universities. In addition, there is need for further research to come up with a framework for promoting mental wellbeing among universities in developing countries. Such a framework would help guide policy formulation and inform the design of programmes to enhance psychological health in institutions of higher learning.

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