

# Exploring Student Adaptation to Emergency Online Learning: Psychological Readiness and Study Environments

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of study environments on the psychological readiness of students during emergency online learning scenarios in a post-pandemic context. Conducted during a festive season at a Malaysian university, the research examines how factors such as quietness, comfort, internet connectivity, and family dynamics shape the ability of 80 diploma students to adapt to the sudden shift to fully online classes. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through an open-ended survey, and thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes. The findings reveal that conducive study environments, initiated by minimal distractions, comfortable workspaces, reliable internet access, and supportive family interactions, are crucial for enhancing students' focus and engagement in online learning. The study highlights the need for educational institutions to provide guidelines and resources to help students optimise their study environments. Additionally, it emphasises the importance of fostering family communication strategies to reduce disruptions. These insights offer valuable implications for future emergency learning scenarios, suggesting that targeted interventions could significantly improve student adaptation and academic performance. Future research should further investigate the long-term effects of these environmental factors and the effectiveness of specific interventions in enhancing students' psychological readiness.

**Keywords:** Emergency Online learning, Psychological readiness, Study environments

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented disruptions to education worldwide, leading to a rapid and often unplanned shift to online learning. This emergency transition, particularly in higher education, required students to quickly adapt to a fully online learning environment with little preparation or support. The ability to adapt to this emergency online learning situation became critical for students' success, as it involved not just the acquisition of new technological skills but also the psychological readiness to engage effectively in a new mode of learning (Bao, 2020; Ulanday et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, as in many other countries, this shift posed significant challenges to students who were previously accustomed to traditional face-to-face learning. The need to quickly establish a conducive study environment at home, maintain motivation, and manage stress levels in the face of ongoing uncertainties required substantial psychological resilience (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). Although the initial crisis phase has passed, the ongoing need for adaptability in a post-pandemic world remains relevant, especially during periods that require a temporary return to fully online classes. Such situations include instances like the recent Ramadan period, where most university students in Malaysia were required to undergo online classes, demonstrating the continued importance of psychological readiness and study environment in adapting to emergency online learning situations.

Despite the substantial research on online learning readiness, the unique challenges posed by the need for sudden shifts back to online learning in post-pandemic scenarios have not been fully explored. Understanding how students navigate these recurring challenges is crucial for developing strategies that can enhance their adaptability in future disruptions. By examining the factors that contributed to or hindered their adaptation, this

study seeks to provide insights that can inform both educators and policymakers in creating more adaptive online learning systems.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study investigates how Malaysian university students adapted to emergency shifts back to online learning in a post-pandemic context, particularly during periods like recent Ramadan when such shifts were implemented to accommodate students' needs. The focus is on their psychological readiness and how their study environments, considering factors such as noise levels, distractions, comfort, and internet connectivity, affected their ability to adapt to this temporary fully online learning mode. The study aims to identify key psychological and environmental factors that influenced students' adaptation and propose strategies to support their readiness for similar situations in the future.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Psychological Adaptation in Emergency Online Learning**

The concept of readiness for online learning typically encompasses technological, academic, and psychological dimensions, each of which plays a critical role in students' success (Mosa et al., 2016). While technological readiness refers to students' access to and proficiency with digital tools, and academic readiness involves the preparedness to engage with content and assignments, psychological readiness is concerned with students' mental and emotional preparedness to cope with the demands of online education (Nassr et al., 2020).

In the post-pandemic era, emergency situations requiring a sudden return to fully online learning, such as temporary shifts caused by infrastructure issues like water supply disruptions or unexpected campus closures, continue to present challenges to psychological readiness. Unlike planned transitions to online learning, these emergency shifts require students to quickly adapt, developing new strategies for managing their studies under abrupt and often stressful circumstances (Bao, 2020). This includes dealing with enhanced stress levels, maintaining motivation in a less structured environment, and adapting to new routines that are often disrupted by external factors (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

Psychological readiness in emergency online learning is not just about the ability to engage with digital platforms, but also about the capacity to self-regulate and remain resilient in the face of adversity. Self-regulation, which involves setting goals, managing time, and monitoring one's own progress, becomes especially crucial when external support structures such as physical classrooms and face-to-face interactions with instructors are removed (Garrison, 2007). Emotional resilience, the ability to recover from setbacks and persist despite challenges, is equally important as students face the uncertainties and disruptions caused by the pandemic (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012).

Moreover, the role of intrinsic motivation cannot be understated. In the absence of the external motivators present in traditional learning environments, such as peer interaction and direct teacher supervision, students' ability to stay motivated is largely dependent on their internal drive and the relevance they perceive in their studies (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research suggests that students who are able to connect their learning to personal goals or who find intrinsic value in the subject matter are more likely to succeed in online learning environments, even under emergency conditions (Reyes-Millán et al., 2023).

The ability to quickly adapt to these new and challenging conditions is influenced by several factors, including the quality of students' study environments. A conducive environment can significantly reduce stress and distractions, thus enhancing students' ability to focus and be productive (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Conversely, environments that are noisy, crowded, or poorly equipped can exacerbate the difficulties of online learning, leading to frustration, anxiety, and decreased academic performance (Li et al., 2023).

### **Impact of Study Environments on Adaptation**

The physical and psychological aspects of the study environment play a crucial role in determining students' ability to adapt to online learning. A well-organised, quiet, and comfortable study space is associated with better concentration, reduced stress levels, and higher academic performance (Li et al., 2023). However, emergency

shifts to online learning often require students to create temporary study environments at home, which are often not ideal.

The design of a study environment involves multiple factors, including noise levels, lighting, furniture setups, and access to necessary resources such as computers and internet connectivity (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). Research has consistently shown that environments with minimal distractions, adequate lighting, and comfortable seating are more conducive to learning (Reyes-Millán et al., 2023). In contrast, environments that are noisy, poorly lit, or physically uncomfortable can lead to decreased motivation, increased anxiety, and lower academic achievement (Gumasing & Castro, 2023).

According to Al-Kumaim et al. (2021), the challenges of creating an effective study environment increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, as students often had to manage shared spaces with family members or housemates who were also engaged in work or study activities, complicating the online learning experience. This shared use of space introduced new sources of distraction and conflict, making it difficult for students to establish the quiet, focused environment needed for effective online learning. Additionally, the suddenness of the transition left little time for students to prepare their study spaces, further deepening the difficulties they faced.

Despite these challenges, some students were able to create study environments that supported their adaptation to emergency online learning. These environments typically included dedicated study areas that were physically separated from the rest of the household, as well as tools and strategies for minimising distractions, such as noise-cancelling headphones or strict study schedules (Moore et al., 2011; Reyes-Millán et al., 2023). Students who had access to these resources and who were able to establish effective study routines reported higher levels of engagement and academic performance (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

However, the quality of the study environment is not just about physical conditions; it also involves the psychological atmosphere. For instance, students who felt supported by their family or housemates, whether through respect for study times or through encouragement, were more likely to maintain focus and motivation (Li et al., 2023). Conversely, those who experienced conflict or a lack of understanding from those around them often struggled to maintain the psychological readiness needed for effective learning (Gumasing & Castro, 2023).

The emergency shift to online learning highlighted the importance of adaptable study environments that could meet the demands of this new mode of education. As students continue to cope with the challenges of online learning, both during and after the pandemic, the need for environments that support psychological readiness will remain critical. Institutions can play a key role in this by providing guidelines for creating conducive study spaces and by offering resources to help students adapt their environments to the demands of online learning (Bao, 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants and Context

This study involved 80 diploma students from a university in Malaysia. All participants were aged between 18 and 20 years. While students were allowed to go home during the online learning period, a portion of them remained in their university hostels, while others returned to their family homes. The participants were a mix of male and female students, and table 1 below provides a summary of their gender, age group, and living arrangements during the study.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents (n = 80)

Category		n (%)
Gender	Female	65 (81.25)
	Male	15 (18.75)

Age Group	18 – 20 years old	80 (100)
Living Arrangements	Staying in hostel	23 (28.75)
	Staying at home	57 (71.25)

## Data Collection

Data were collected using an open-ended survey question: "Study Environment: Describe your current study environment (e.g., quiet, distractions, etc.)." The survey was administered online over a three-week period during Ramadan, a time when most public universities in Malaysia had allowed students to engage in fully online learning. The question was derived from established frameworks on learning environments and psychological readiness in emergency online learning settings (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Mosa et al., 2016). These frameworks emphasise key factors such as study environment quality, self-regulation, and motivation. The question aimed to gather responses on noise levels, physical comfort, internet connectivity, and distractions which are some elements highlighted in prior studies (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). The open-ended format encouraged students to provide specific details about the challenges and support systems within their environments. Participants were also informed about the study's purpose and assured of their anonymity.

## Data Analysis

The collected responses were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved familiarising with the data, coding significant features, developing and refining themes, and providing clear definitions for each theme. Only a representative selection of excerpts is presented in the findings to highlight the most common perspectives, as many responses shared similar themes.

This approach allowed for obtaining detailed and comprehensive insights into the various factors affecting students' study environments during the emergency online learning period.

## FINDINGS

### Thematic Analysis of Study Environments

The analysis of the Google Form responses reveals that the psychological readiness of students in adapting to emergency online learning is significantly influenced by their study environments. The following themes emerged from the analysis, each supported by direct excerpts from the students' responses.

### Quietness and Distractions

Many students emphasised the need for a quiet study environment, which they found conducive to concentration and free from distractions. This is evidenced by the following responses:

*"I have a good study environment which is quiet and relaxing space."*

*"My study environment is quite good. It doesn't have any distraction in the morning because my other siblings go to school and my parents went to work."*

However, other students faced challenges in maintaining a consistently quiet environment due to external factors. This is demonstrated by the samples of responses below:

*"Currently I'm just in my house and going nowhere, so the environment around here is sometimes quiet, sometimes not. This Ramadan it is quite noisy at night around 8 pm because kids are having fun playing 'bunga api' and 'mercun'."*

*"Sometimes it's loud but sometimes a very creepy quiet."*

These variations illustrate the difficulty in maintaining a quiet environment, particularly in homes with multiple

family members or during culturally significant times like Ramadan.

### **Comfort and Workspace Setup**

Comfort in the study environment was highlighted as another critical factor. Students with comfortable seating and adequate space reported better experiences. This is illustrated by the following samples of responses:

*"My current study environment now is quite good since I have a comfortable seating and enough space to study. I also have a study area with minimal interruptions so that I can focus on the class and also my work."*

Conversely, while some students had positive experiences with their study environments, others faced challenges, particularly related to disruptions in shared spaces. The samples of responses below demonstrate this:

*"Comfortable but get disturbed by my siblings and cats sometimes."*

*"I'm staying at college so it's a very good place to study, the environment is good, quiet, and easy to access the internet."*

These responses indicate that experiences varied, with some students benefiting from quieter, more controlled environments, while others faced interruptions that impacted their comfort and concentration.

### **Internet Connectivity**

Stable internet connectivity was crucial for effective online learning. Students with reliable internet connections found it easier to participate in online classes. The example that follow reflect this:

*"The only problem that I face is internet outages because it always makes me late to enter the class."*

Some students who lived in hostels benefited from better internet access. The sample response below highlight this point:

*"I'm staying at college so it's a very good place to study, the environment is good, quiet and easy to access the internet."*

In contrast, those studying from home, particularly in areas with less reliable internet, faced more significant challenges.

### **Family and Social Dynamics**

Family presence and activities significantly impacted students' study environments. Many students thrived when their families respected their study schedules. The following examples illustrates this point:

*"For now, I think my study environment is good because my family understands my study schedule, so they didn't disturb me when I'm in my class."*

However, family dynamics could also introduce challenges, as reflected in these responses:

*"Currently, I'm just in my house, and going nowhere so the environment around here is sometimes quiet, sometimes not."*

*"First is location. Because now we online classes at home, so I have nephews and niece at my home, so I can't focus on my study, but it's okay I still can handle it."*

The analysis of the students' responses to the open-ended question about their study environments revealed several key themes related to their psychological readiness for online learning. These themes include quietness and distractions, comfort and physical setup, internet connectivity, and family and social dynamics.

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## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant role that study environments play in students' psychological readiness to adapt to emergency online learning. These findings align with several key concepts discussed in the literature review, particularly the dimensions of psychological readiness and the impact of study environments on students' ability to successfully engage in online learning.

### Quietness and Distractions

As noted by Gonzalez et al. (2020), a conducive environment can significantly reduce stress and distractions, enhancing students' ability to focus and be productive. The students in this study who reported having quiet and distraction-free environments were better able to concentrate and engage with their online learning activities. This is consistent with the idea that minimal distractions are crucial for maintaining psychological readiness, as mentioned by Driessen et al. (2020) and Li et al. (2023). However, the challenges faced by some students in maintaining a quiet environment, particularly during culturally significant times like Ramadan, demonstrate the difficulty of achieving such ideal conditions in shared or family-influenced spaces. This supports the argument by Al-Kumaim et al. (2021) that shared spaces introduce new sources of distraction, complicating the online learning experience.

### Comfort and Workspace Setup

Comfort in the study environment emerged as another critical factor, which resonates with the findings of Reyes-Millán et al. (2023), who emphasised the importance of ergonomically sound and comfortable study spaces. Students who had access to comfortable seating and adequate space reported better experiences, which aligns with the literature that suggests physical comfort can enhance learning outcomes by reducing physical strain and allowing students to focus better (Ibem et al., 2017). In contrast, those who experienced discomfort or disruptions in shared spaces reported difficulties, which further aggravated the stress associated with emergency online learning. This finding is consistent with the research of Gumasing and Castro (2023), who found that physically uncomfortable environments could lead to decreased motivation and lower academic achievement.

### Internet Connectivity

The critical role of stable internet connectivity in facilitating online learning was also highlighted in this study, in line with the findings of Gonzalez et al. (2020). Students who reported reliable internet connections were able to participate more effectively in online classes, while those with frequent outages struggled to maintain engagement. This reflects the technological dimension of online learning readiness discussed by Mosa et al. (2016) and Ahmed and Opoku (2022), where access to reliable digital tools and infrastructure is essential for successful online learning.

### Family and Social Dynamics

Finally, the impact of family and social dynamics on students' study environments and psychological readiness was evident in the findings. As noted in the literature, psychological readiness involves not just the ability to engage with digital platforms but also the capacity to self-regulate and remain resilient in the face of adversity (Garrison, 2007; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). Students who felt supported by their family or housemates were better able to maintain focus and motivation, while those who faced conflicts or a lack of understanding struggled to stay engaged. This finding aligns with the research of Li et al. (2023), which suggests that a supportive psychological atmosphere is as important as the physical study environment. This support often manifests in respecting study schedules and creating a quiet environment conducive to learning. On the other hand, the presence of family members in shared spaces can introduce distractions, as noted by Gumasing & Castro (2023), who found that conflicts or a lack of understanding from family members can negatively impact students' psychological readiness for effective learning.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the importance of a conducive study environment for the psychological readiness of students engaged in online learning. The key themes identified provide insights into

the various factors that influence students' ability to focus and effectively participate in their online courses.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study emphasise the critical role of study environments in shaping students' psychological readiness for emergency online learning. The research highlights that a conducive study environment, characterised by quietness, comfort, stable internet connectivity, and supportive family dynamics, significantly enhances students' ability to adapt to the sudden demands of online education. These elements align with the dimensions of psychological readiness discussed in the literature, emphasising the importance of both physical and psychological factors in successful online learning engagement.

## Practical Implications

Given these findings, educational institutions should prioritise providing students with guidelines and resources to optimise their study environments. This includes not only recommendations for ergonomic furniture and noise-cancelling tools but also strategies for improving family communication to reduce conflicts and distractions during study times. (Kuan & Lee, 2022). Moreover, institutions should advocate for improved internet infrastructure, particularly in areas where connectivity issues are prevalent, to ensure that all students have equitable access to online learning (Martin et al., 2020).

## Future Research Directions

Future research should explore the long-term impacts of these environmental factors on academic performance and psychological well-being. Additionally, studies could examine the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as family workshops or the provision of ergonomic resources, in enhancing students' readiness and success in emergency online learning contexts. Understanding these dynamics further will enable educators and policymakers to better support students in future disruptions, ensuring resilience and adaptability in an increasingly digital learning landscape.

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