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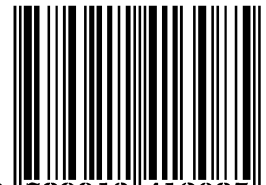
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Perceived Psychosocial Impacts of COVID - 19 among Students in Higher Learning Institutions in Dar - es- Salaam, Tanzania

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Abstract

Students in higher learning institutions have been affected by COVID – 19 due to mobility restrictions that led to psychological disturbances and limited teaching and learning processes. This study examined the perceived psychosocial impacts of COVID – 19 among students in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam region in Tanzania. The study employed a cross-sectional research design and quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect data from a sample size of 200 respondents. The findings revealed that there was moderate to severe perceived fear of COVID -19 infection among students. Anxiety and depression due to challenges encountered by students and the trauma and grief for losing family members and friends were moderate to normal. The study showed further that COVID –19 had no impacts in cognitive functioning of the students. Students' concentration in studies and attention in class was normal. The study revealed further that there was high access to information on the prevention against COVID – 19 among students. However, access to counselling services was low. Higher learning institutions should provide counselling services that address emotional impacts such as fear, anxiety, and stress. Psychological counselling should target to mitigate stress, anxiety, and depression among students. In addition, training on stress management and coping skills should be provided and enhanced.

Keywords: COVID – 19, higher learning institutions, psychosocial impacts, Tanzania

1. Introduction

COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus. It has had an impact on all people around the world causing psychological trauma that necessitated the provision of counselling and psychosocial support to those affected. University students have been among the most affected sections of the population by COVID – 19 due to restrictions on freedom of movement that constrained teaching and learning activities (Gonzalez, Planchuelo- Gomez, Irurtia & Luis-Garcia, 2020; URT, 2020a). Teaching and learning were directly affected due to lack of face – to - face interactions during the closure of learning institutions. Hence, the learning process continued using distance mode through online technologies (E learning Africa, 2020).

Higher learning institutions provide opportunities for development and equal access to education among students. However, due to the outbreak of COVID -19 studies were disrupted following the closure of higher learning institutions (World Bank, 2020; SADC, 2020). Students were engaged in learning mainly through online delivery including video conferencing and online meeting (e.g. Webex and Zoom). Online delivery also included email, phones, and mobile services. However, in order to have smooth equitable access to education, infrastructure and broadband capacity ought to be adequate and optimally functioning. However, these were found as a challenge in the provision of education in higher learning institutions during COVID -19 (Mugo, Odera & Wachira, 2020). Despite the challenges attributed by the threats of the pandemic, higher learning institutions continued to focus on their core functions (teaching, research and consultancy).

The closure of higher learning institutions due to COVID – 19 disengaged students from interactive learning process, which affected negatively their learning. In addition, restrictions of interaction between students' increased psychological effects leading to panic, anxiety, fear, stress, hopelessness, loneliness, and sadness (World Bank, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Psychological impacts affected students' ability to think critically, impaired creativity and compromised academic performance. Students also feared for their safety and that of their families (Jezreel, Orendain & Djalante, 2020).

Psychosocial impact is the effect caused by environmental and biological factors on individual's social and psychological aspects. It may involve traumatic events that affect an individual psychologically leading moderate to high levels of fear of infection, anxiety, panic behaviour, stress, social stigma, loss of family members, and psychological distress (Gellman & Turner, 2013; UNDP, 2020a; URT, 2020a). Emotional difficulties among students resulting from college closure, disrupted

education, led to social isolation, and loss of social connection, severely affecting mental well-being of the students, resilience and trust (Mboya, John, Kibopile, Mhando, George & Ngocho, 2020; WHO, 2020).

Efforts have been made to ensure that people in Tanzania adhere to preventive measures against COVID—19. Among the efforts was the closure of education institutions at all levels. Other measures include provision of correct information about the pandemic. Prevention strategies were observed by everybody countrywide. Despite the closure of schools and higher learning institutions, education continued to be provided at all levels through distance teaching using TV and radio programmes coordinated by the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) and The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The provided distance teaching ensured that every child in urban and rural area get access to education (URT, 2020b). Furthermore, higher learning institutions used online delivery mode such as emails, zoom, and video conference (SADC, 2020; UNDP, 2020b).

However, little is known on how the pandemic has affected students' psychological and social life. The study assumes that a sudden closure of learning institutions and the disruption of students' regular patterns of studies had psychosocial impacts. This study therefore examined psychological and social impacts of COVID – 19 among students in higher learning institutions. Specifically, the study assessed the perceived psychosocial impacts of COVID – 19 as well as the perceived accessibility to COVID -19 preventive measures among students in higher learning institutions. The study sought to answer the following research questions. First, how COVID- 19 affected students' psychological and social life? The second question was how students accessed COVID- 19 prevention measures.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Emotional Processing Theory, which originated from Lang's ideas in 1970's. This was later developed by Rachman in 1980's. According to the theory, fear is activated through associative networks that involve information about the feared stimulus and avoidance responses to the feared stimulus such as threat or danger. According to Lang fear image is a cognitive structure containing stimulus, response, and information that act as a means of escaping from danger. Moreover, Rachman posits that absorption of emotional disturbances enables other behaviours and experiences to continue without disruptions (Foa, Huppert & Cahill, 2006).

According to emotional processing theory, people have to stay with their anxiety, which can slowly be reduced through habituation (exposure to feared stimulus). Hence, repeated habituation reduces fear leading to the belief that the feared consequences are less likely to occur and are milder than the expected. Thus, habituation results into a reduction of anxiety (Foa, Huppert & Cahill, 2006). The study used this theory to explain emotional difficulties that resulted from COVID – 19 threats. It also explains disruptions experienced among students and their families that affected the studies. The theory shows that exposure to correct information about COVID - 19 (habituation) helps to reduce anxiety, fear, and panic disorders associated with the pandemic. It therefore, allows compliance with preventive strategies and coping mechanisms for COVID - 19 among students. Hence, in the context of this study, students managed to continue with the studies despite the threat of the pandemic due to their ability to manage fear and stressful conditions related to COVID -19.

3. Methodology

3.1 The study area

The study was conducted in Dar –es –Salaam in Temeke District. The population in Temeke is 1,368,881 where males are 669,056 and females are 699,825. The population in Ilala District is 1,220,611 where males are 595,928 and females are 624,683 (URT, 2013). Dar - es Salaam region was selected as a study area because it was among the regions with high number of reported COVID - 19 infection cases.

3.2 Research design

The study employed a cross-sectional research design using quantitative and qualitative approaches. Both primary and secondary data were collected. Primary data were collected using questionnaire with open and closed - ended questions. Secondary data were collected through documentary review.

3.3 Study Population, sampling procedures and Sample size

The study population was undergraduate students at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA) and College of Business Education (CBE) who were in the college during data collection and provided their informed consent. The study sample was 200 respondents. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the respondents in second and third year of study.

3.4 Data analysis procedures

Data were entered and analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science). The responses were scored 1 for a correct response and 0 for incorrect response. The scores were categorized in percentages as severe (75 - 100%), moderate (74 - 50%), and normal (0 – 49%). The respondents were required to indicate their perceived impacts based on the categories that were provided. Psychosocial impact of COVID – 19 was measured by 12 items. Cronbach alpha was used to assess the reliability of the items. The acceptable reliability coefficient is equal or greater than 0.70. (Lavrakas, 2008). In this study, alpha coefficient for the 12 items was 0.796, which is an acceptable range. Moreover, Pearson’s Chi - square test was used to determine statistical significant difference of the responses across gender divide.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic characteristics were analysed according to age, sex, occupation, and area of residence. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table: 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics of Respondents		M	F	n	%
Age	20 - 24	59	71	130	65
	25 - 29	25	17	42	21
	30 - 34	10	8	18	9
	35 - 39	6	4	10	5
Sex		100	100	200	100
Education	Bachelor Degree year 2	50	50	100	50
	Bachelor Degree year 3	50	50	100	50
Occupation	Student	78	77	155	77.5
	Self-employed	9	7	16	8
	Teacher	10	12	22	11
	Social worker	3	4	7	3.5
Residence	In - Campus	38	30	68	34
	Off - Campus	62	70	132	66

M=Female F= Female

The findings in Table 1 show that more than a half (65%) of the students were between 20 - 24 years of age. Likewise, more than a half (77.5%) of the students were not employed. The findings show further that more than a half (66%) of the students reside in off - campus. This suggests that students had to commute daily

to their learning institutions. This had implication for COVID – 19-infection risk due to interactions in various public facilities especially during an outbreak of COVID-19. Hence, community mobility contributes to a high risk of COVID – 19 infections (URT, 2020a).

4.2 Perceived Psychosocial Impacts of COVID – 19 among Students

The respondents were required to rate their perceived impacts of COVID - 19 into three categories severe, moderate and normal. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Perceived Psychosocial Impacts of COVID – 19 among Students (n=200)

COVID Impacts	Severe	Moderate	Normal	χ^2	df	P Value
Emotional						
Fear of being infected	141(70.5)	39(19.5)	20(10)	1.634	2	0.442
Anxiety about the pandemic	71(35.5)	98(49)	31(15.5)	0.322	2	0.851
Depression following the challenges encountered	73(36.5)	91(45.5)	36(18)	6.677	2	0.035*
Trauma for loosing loved ones	40(20)	55(27.5)	105(52.5)	6.943	2	0.031*
Grief for loosing family members and friends	35(17.5)	66(33)	99(49.5)	8.701	2	0.013*
Social and Cognitive						
Loss of concentration in studies	61(30.5)	61(30.5)	78(39)	0.295	2	0.863
Loss of attention in class	67(33.5)	48(24)	85(42.5)	5.781	2	0.056*
Memory loss	27(13.5)	63(31.5)	110(55)	0.216	2	0.898
Poor academic performance	67(33.5)	75(37.5)	58(29)	2.932	2	0.097
Inability to be creative in handling issues	58(29)	68(34)	74(37)	2.719	2	0.257
Socio-economic pressure	101(50.5)	69(34.5)	30(15)	6.063	2	0.048*
Loss of family livelihoods	96(48)	53(26.5)	51(25.5)	2.932	2	0.231

Numbers in brackets are percentages * = significant at $p < 0.05$

4.2.1 Emotional impacts

Regarding emotional impacts, the findings in Table 2 show that the perceived fear of being infected was severe as rated by 70.5 percent of the respondents. Also about a half, which is, 49 and 45.5 percent of the respondents reported moderate anxiety and depression respectively following the challenges encountered about the pandemic. In addition, trauma and grief for loosing family members and friends was found to be normal as reported by 52.5 and 49.5 percent respectively.

The findings show further that there was a significant difference among the respondents in depression following the challenges encountered at $p < 0.05$. The same was found with trauma and grief for losing family members and friends with significant differences among responses at $p < 0.05$. This implies that there was depression among students due to the challenges they experienced from the disruptions of their studies. Other studies also reported moderate to severe depression and anxiety as having had negative consequences on academic activities among respondents and low motivation to study (Li, Cao, Leung and Mark, 2020; Grubic, Badovinac & John, 2020).

4.2.2 Cognitive and social Impacts

Regarding cognitive impacts, the findings show that more than one third (39 %) of the respondents reported normal concentration in the studies. The findings also show that attention in class was reported to be normal as reported by 42.5 percent of the respondents. Furthermore, there were significant differences among the responses ($p < 0.05$) on concentration in the studies. Moreover, memory loss due to COVID -19 threat was normal as reported by 55 percent of the respondents. These findings suggest that COVID – 19 did not affected students' memory hence it has had no impact on students' studies. Therefore, students managed to concentrate on their studies despite the threat of COVID infection.

The findings also show that one-third (33.5%) of the respondents reported have experienced severe poor academic performance. Moreover, more than one third of the respondents (37.5 %) reported to have moderate poor academic performance the findings show further that there were no significant differences among respondents on levels of academic performance. The findings suggest that there were students whose academic performance was affected by the disruptions of studies due to the outbreak of COVID - 19. Despite that the number of affected respondents seems not to be alarming it calls for a need of assisting students to cope with impacts of COVID –19 that affected their studies. In addition, the finding also show that more than one third (37 %) reported that creativity and ability to handle issues was normal. This suggest that COVID –19 had no impacts in cognitive functioning of the students. The students continued with studies without cognitive impacts resulting from COVID – 19. This study finding was in contrast with the finding in a study conducted in Northern Tanzania that shows that university students in Tanzania experience high levels of mental distress, which significantly impaired their cognitive functioning, causing learning disabilities, and poor academic performance (Mboya, John, Kibopile, Mhando, George & Ngocho, 2020).

Regarding social impacts, the findings show that 50.5 percent of the respondents reported that social economic pressure was severe to them and their families. Likewise, one third (34.5 %) of the respondents showed that the social economic pressure was moderate. In addition, there were significant differences among the respondents at $p < 0.05$ on social and economic pressure. The findings imply that the threat of the pandemic affected social economic activities among individuals and families despite absence of the lockdown. Fear of being infected with COVID-19 affected the normal running of both social and economic activities. This had implication in learning and educational outcomes. Students who relied on their own sources for meeting university costs including fees reported that they experienced challenges.

Furthermore, 48 percent of the respondents reported to have severe loss of family livelihoods. That is, the pandemic threats affected income generation activities. UNDP (2020b) and World Bank, (2020c) also revealed that COVID-19 had increased economic and social stress due to restricted movement, social distancing and isolation measures. These contributed in disrupting livelihoods.

4.3 Perceived Access to COVID - 19 Prevention measures

The study sought to determine how students get access to COVID -19 preventive measures. The findings in Table 3 provide the findings.

Table 3: Perceived Access to COVID - 19 Prevention measures

Prevention Strategies	Male		Female		χ^2	df	P Value
	Yes	No	Yes	No			
Access to prevention information and services	83(41.5)	17(8.5)	94(47)	6 (3)	5.944	2	0.015*
Access to counselling services	78(39)	22(11)	79(39.5)	21(10.5)	0.030	1	0.863

Numbers in brackets are percentages * = significant at $p < 0.05$

The findings show that 47 percent of female respondents reported higher access to information on prevention and services against COVID – 19 compared to male respondents (41.5 %). The findings also show significant differences across gender divide ($p < 0.05$) on access to information on prevention and services against COVID. These findings imply that even though both males and females seem to have access to information on prevention and services against COVID – 19, access to information was higher among females than was the case among

males. This suggest that female were active in seeking for information about COVID -19 and complied with preventive measures more than did males. The study findings were in contrast with findings in other studies which show that information seeking behaviour and access to reproductive health education was low among females compared with males (Losioki, 2020; Dunor & Urassa, 2019). This also suggests that females were active in seeking for information on matters that were not related to reproductive health and cultural aspects. However, this calls for further investigation.

The findings showed further that only one third, that is, 39 and 39.5 percent of males and females respectively had access to counselling services. This suggests that access to counselling services was low among the respondents. In addition, there was no significant difference among male and female respondents on access to counselling services. Figure 1 show the results.

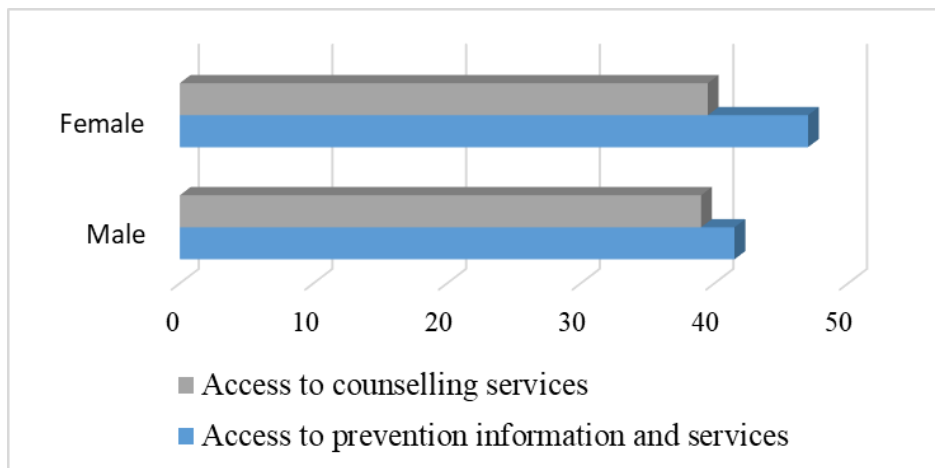


Figure 1: Perceived Access to COVID - 19 Prevention measures

The findings of this study are in line with the finding from a study by Chengula and Losioki (2015) which revealed that there was low uptake of counselling among students. Moreover, counselling relationships and counselling seeking behaviour hindered compliance with preventive measures among students. This implies that there were factors that impede provision of counselling services including counselling relationships, availability of counselling services and inadequate correct information about counselling services. This calls for improvement on counselling services in higher learning institutions.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examined psychological and social impacts of COVID – 19 among students in higher learning institutions. Specifically, the study assessed the perceived psychosocial impacts of COVID – 19 as well as the perceived

accessibility to COVID -19 preventive measures among students in higher learning institutions. The study revealed that COVID -19 had psychological impacts among students in higher learning institutions. The study revealed further that perceived fear of being infected with COVID -19 was moderate to severe. Anxiety and depression following the challenges encountered by students were at a severe to moderate level. In addition, trauma and grief for losing family members and friends was normal. The study revealed further that COVID -19 impacts were not severe in cognitive functioning of the students. Students' concentration and attention in the class was normal.

The study also revealed that the threat of the pandemic affected social economic activities among students and families despite the fact that there was no lockdown. Fear of being infected with COVID -19 affected the normal running of both social and economic activities. This had implication in teaching and learning.

In addition, the study revealed that access to information on prevention and services for COVID – 19 was high among females than was the case among males. Therefore, females were active in seeking for information about COVID - 19 and complied more with preventive measures than did males. However, access to counselling services was low among both male and female students.

The study recommends that students should be provided with counselling services that address emotional impacts such as fear, anxiety, and stress. Psychological counselling will help to lower stress, anxiety, and depression among students. The study also recommends that training on stress management and coping skills should be provided as a matter of urgency to students. This would help students to identify irrational beliefs and address them logically.

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