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First-Year University Students' Psychological Well-being Through Seven Weeks of Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: University life is colourful, filled with a plethora of memorable moments both academic and non-academic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, first-year university students' academic experiences may have differed from their expectations due to being conducted fully online. The COVID-19 pandemic denied first-year students the opportunity to join in-person classes and become involved in university activities in a physical setting. All activities were moved to virtual settings, and students could only contact their classsmates and lecturers via social media platforms. This derailment of expectations may dampen students' enthusiasm and impact their levels of motivation and happiness. To explore this phenomenon, a study was conducted with 143 first-year psychology students to examine their self-reported motivational and happiness levels before and after seven weeks of online classes. This study included 113 females (79%) and 30 males (21%) with a mean age of 20.68 (SD = 1.88). Data collected revealed that students' motivation and happiness levels declined significantly after their online classes. Based on the level of agreement with one item—'Overall, I am happy with my university life'—48 (33.60%) students agreed, 76 (53.10%) were neutral, and 19 (13.30%) indicated dissatisfaction. This study may assist the university and relevant authorities in understanding students' perceptions of dealing with academic and life challenges while learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, psychological strategies should be considered to enhance first-year students' motivation and happiness levels when faced with online classes in their new first semester.

Keywords: *COVID-19, online learning, psychological well-being, motivation, happiness.*

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1. Introduction

Various academic and non-academic activities conducted by universities are designed to encourage university students to take charge of their own education and seek out experiential learning opportunities in and beyond the classroom (George & Thomas, 2020). Some of these activities create significant memories that will be treasured by students long after graduation. These memories of university life, however, might be significantly different for the first-year, first-semester students whose learning was fully online during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Malaysia, due to the increasing number of cases of COVID-19, the Ministry of Higher Education instructed all higher learning institutions to suspend students' registration for on-campus classes at the beginning of the first semester of the 2020–21 session. As a result, students who joined online classes from home did not have the same access to learning facilities - such as computers, books, and high-speed internet connection - as they would have had at the university (Sahu, 2020).

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Higher Education instructed all higher learning institutions to suspend the students' registration on campus in the beginning of semester one, session 2020/2021 due to the spreading cases of coronavirus in Malaysia.

University students who experienced shutdowns and quarantines instead of the anticipated adventures of an in-person campus learning environment may find their expectations further thwarted by the realities of online learning, such as unstable internet connections, noisy home environment, the tight learning schedule of online classes, and academic workload. Students who join online classes from home did not have adequate learning facilities such as computers, books and high speed internet connection as in the university (Sahu, 2020). For some university students in rural areas in Sabah, Malaysia, the struggle to get a good internet connection was one of the prominent issues. This problem was even worse in areas not provided with electricity. In other rural areas, electricity was only available for up to 12 hours a day (Ansiung, 2020). This may have prevented students from recharging their laptops or other learning devices for their online classes. Electricity shortages can also affect internet connectivity. It was reported that 52% of students in Sabah, Malaysia faced similar problems accessing the internet due to inadequate infrastructure (Berita Harian Online, 2020). These factors may cause insecurity and stress when students disconnected from online learning. They sense that they are missing out on the overall college experience by not being on campus (Verena, 2020).

Although today's university students are among 'Generation Z', and have lived with access to advanced technology their entire lives, not all of them have similar privileges from which they might benefit from that technology, including in online learning settings; this is due to a lack of access to resources such as internet connections, electricity, digital devices, and technology skills. Generation Z is the first generation of humans who have been exposed to rapid technological advances that drastically outpace that of the previous generation (Dennington, 2021). Still, most university students are exposed to technology in various settings, such as in education. Exposure to technology has allowed some students to develop new and transformational learning during this pandemic, which may advance their technology skills and creativity. Nevertheless, some students are not properly equipped, and this has caused turbulence for them to compete with other university students participating in online learning during the pandemic.

This reality prompted the Malaysian Ministry of Education and universities across the country to look into the matter seriously and to ensure that no university students would be left behind in the learning process during the pandemic. Several strategies were conducted by universities to reach students in rural areas, including mailing the teaching and learning materials to students who were unable to join online learning and sending them links to recorded lectures which had been uploaded to YouTube. This provided opportunities for students to engage in the learning process, even if that meant just watching recorded lectures, and provided the flexibility to allow students to participate whenever they were able to access the internet.

These strategies might help to decrease students' worries and problems temporarily but not permanently. University students still express their unpreparedness to engage in online learning due to inadequate equipment and unconducive environments (Nur Salina et al., 2020). In some universities, students might already be familiar with the online learning platform provided by the university. Adams et al. (2021) stated that universities around the world have already applied e-learning as a compulsory component of higher education, even before the pandemic. Most lecturers use blended online learning methods to upload their lecture notes, quizzes, course announcements, and academic and tutorial class registrations on the online platform that their universities provide. Students engaged in online learning can usually access all their course materials easily when they are on campus. However, during the pandemic, students have needed to access their courses and materials online from their homes, and this may have caused trouble for students who have bad internet connections or a lack of facilities, as discussed previously.

However, these obstacles have forced students to develop creative strategies to engage in their online classes and online exams. For instance, the viral video of a university student, Veveonah, who climbed a tree in order to get a good internet connection (Lee, 2020) has grabbed the attention of relevant authorities and helped illustrate the real problems faced by rural students in online learning. Despite all of the hurdles she faced, the student managed to take her online exams successfully. This problem was not unique - it represents problems that other rural students in Sabah had to overcome in order to participate in online classes.

After nearly two years of this pandemic, the challenges of online learning have become quite clear and would likely be something that all prospective students would have come to expect, either on their own or through their communications with the university during the enrolment process. It is hard to believe that, at this point, students would not expect virtual settings to govern the majority if not all of their academic interaction and communication.

What were their motivation and happiness levels before and after experiencing and engaging fully in online learning? To elucidate these phenomena, a study was conducted among first-year psychology students who were attending online classes in their first semester amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The study focuses on students' motivation and happiness level before and after experiencing online classes for seven weeks of semester one. Students' views of happiness were also measured by asking them to define happiness based on their own perspective and to rate their overall level of happiness with their life at university.

2. Literature Review

University students in East Malaysia, (i.e., Sabah and Sarawak) face regular problems with their internet connections, which is one of their challenges engaging in online learning. Other problems can add to their challenges, such as accessing different learning platforms used by different lecturers, limited broadband data transmission, shared laptops and devices with family members, lack of motivation and attention during online classes (because of the absence of in-person contact), difficulty in understanding the content, and a lack of technical skills when performing online learning (Chung et al., 2020).

Another study by Adams et al. (2021) revealed that most Southeast Asian students associate their concerns and worries about online learning with limited internet connection, low-internet bandwidth to support e-learning, and inadequate access to devices at home, such as laptops. Meanwhile,

Annamalai's study (2021) found that online learning did not provide sufficient opportunity for interaction between students, though they showed their readiness to engage in the process. Another study by Muhammad and Sanni (2018) revealed that first-year students at Kampala International University needed more training to navigate the material in an online learning environment.

Quirk and Quirk's study (2020) found that connecting with new course material and their course mates, meeting academic challenges and having a productive at-home learning environment are common challenges facing first year students. For instance, Browning et al.'s study (2021) revealed that, in late-February to mid-May 2020, students from seven universities in the United States experienced lack of motivation, anxiety, stress, and isolation, due to social distancing, education changes and going out less. For students with low grade they may show lack of motivation to learn independently and engage in online classes (Baharum et al., 2021).

To overcome challenges and stresses that can be caused by online learning, university students applied various ways to cope with these negative consequences, such as applying emotion-focused coping (Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021; Chandra, 2021), gaining psychosocial support (Akbar & Aisyawati, 2021; Carreon & Manansala, 2021; Mheidly et al., 2021), and enhancing inner strengths such as resiliency and personal skills (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021; Ang et al., 2021; Cosmas, 2020; Sarmiento et al., 2021).

Based on these previous studies, it can be summarised that most university students showed their unreadiness to engage fully in online learning due to several constraints caused by infrastructural, psychological, and social aspects. All of these factors may affect students' motivation and happiness, particularly among first-year students who are learning completely online.

3. Methodology

The study is based on survey research design in which first-year students were invited to participate and complete a survey using Goggle Forms, which took five to six minutes to complete. In this study, 143 university students participated on a voluntary basis. Each participant was requested to click a 'Yes' indicator on the survey form to show their agreement to participate, after they had read the brief information of the study. The inclusion criteria for participants required that they were first-year psychology students who were enrolled in online learning in the first semester of the 2020–21 academic year. They were also among the only students who had never experienced living on campus or taking part in in-person university classes. All participants were studying at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, which is

located in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. Data were collected after the first seven weeks of online lectures, before their mid-semester one-week break. The reason that the data were collected from a seven-week period is because the first six weeks are usually considered a high-risk transition period, particularly for first-time learners (Krause et al., 2005).

3.2. Instrument

A brief questionnaire consisting of 14 items was used in this study to gather participants' demographic data. Each section, motivation and happiness consisted of two items to measure students' motivation and happiness levels before and after they engaged in online classes. An open questionnaire was also provided to obtain participants' perspectives of happiness. One single item—'Overall, I am happy with my university life'—was used to assess a participant's overall happiness with university life. Participants rated this item by referring to the 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*. Motivation and happiness levels measured two points in time, before and after students experienced their online classes.

Motivation and happiness levels referred to two points, before and after students experienced online classes. They were asked to rank the level of their motivation in relation to the question "How would you describe your motivation level before you were involved in any online classes in your university? On a Likert scale of 1–10, where 1=No motivation at all and 10 = Very highly motivated; 5 means "half-half.' The happiness level was measured based on "How would you describe your level of happiness before you attended any online classes in your university? and was also rated on a scale of 1–10, where 1= Not happy at all to 10=Very happy. The same questions were used to ask students to rank their motivation and happiness levels after receiving their classes online. The test and retest reliability for each motivation and happiness levels was assessed based on the time duration (before & after engaging in online courses), and they showed high reliability values; for motivation, it was .90 and for happiness was .80.

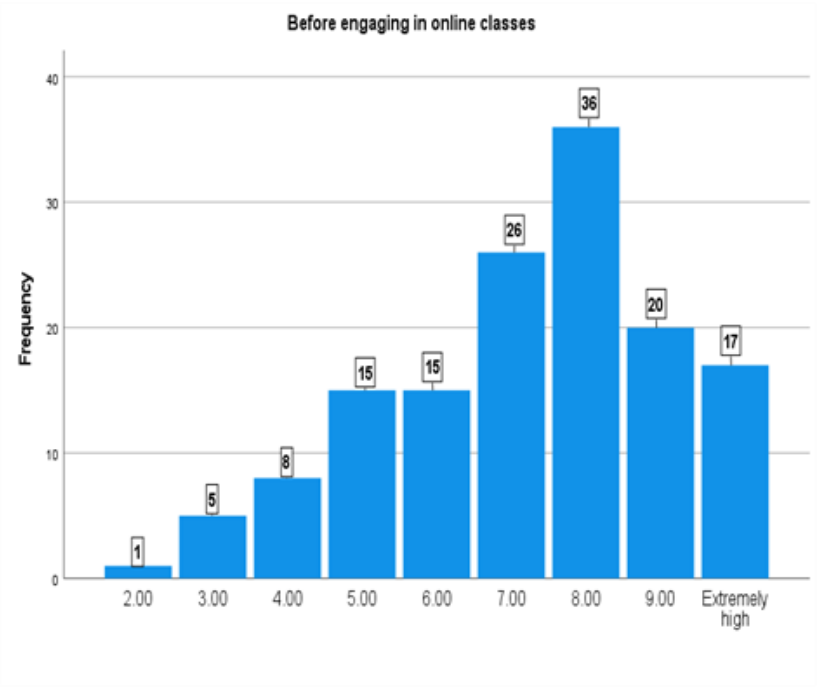
4. Results

In analyzing the final data, all completed data were screened before analyze. The reliability values, for motivational, it showed .09 and happiness was .80. The descriptive analysis showed that a majority participants were females, 113 (79%) and 30 (21%) were males. Their mean age is 20.68 (SD=1.88).

Table 1. Motivation levels before and after engaging in online classes

Number of participants	Mean	SD	t value	Sig.	C Cohen's d
143	7.23	1.90			
			4.81	0.00	.48
143	6.20	1.86			

The analysis of the paired sample t-test showed a significant difference in students' levels of motivation before and after they started their online classes ($t_{(142)} = 4.81$, $p = .00$). The mean level of motivation before was 7.23 (SD=1.90) and after was 6.20 (SD=1.86) (see Table 1). Figure 1 illustrates students' motivational levels before and after engaging in online classes in another format.



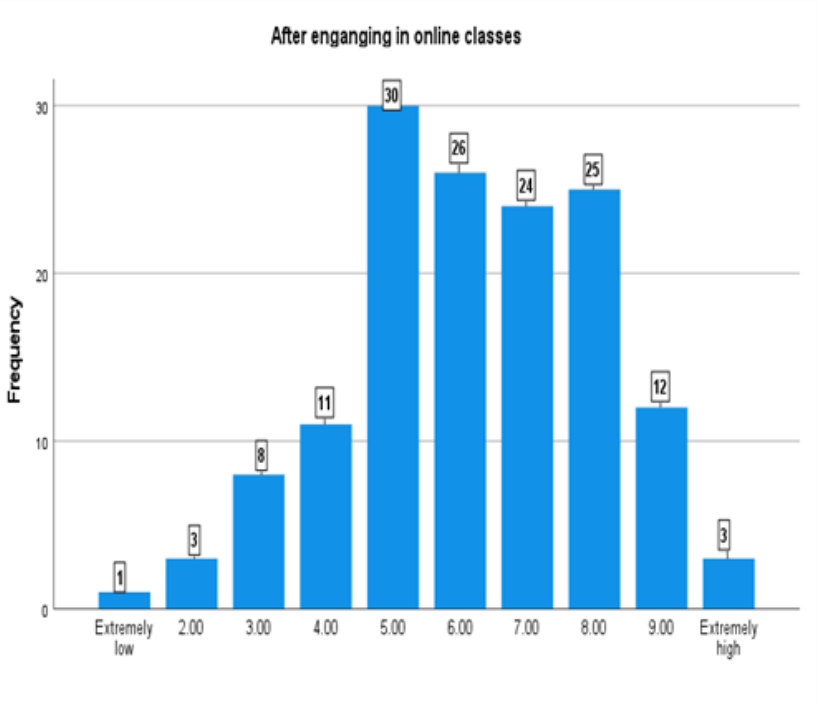


Figure 1. Students' motivational levels before and after engaging in online classes
Source: Researcher's own data (2021)

Table 2. Happiness level before and after engaging in online classes.

Number of participants	Mean	SD	t value	Sig.	Cohen's d
142	7.71	1.90			
			6.73	0.00	.57
142	6.20	1.86			

A paired sample t-test was also used to examine students' levels of happiness before and after they engaged in online learning ($t_{(141)} = 6.73$, $p = .00$). The mean of students' happiness levels before they joined their online classes was 7.71 (SD = 1.90) and after seven weeks it was 6.20 (SD = 1.86) (see Table 2). This indicates that students' levels of happiness had decreased after the seven weeks. Figure 2 illustrates students' happiness levels before and after engaging in online classes in another format.

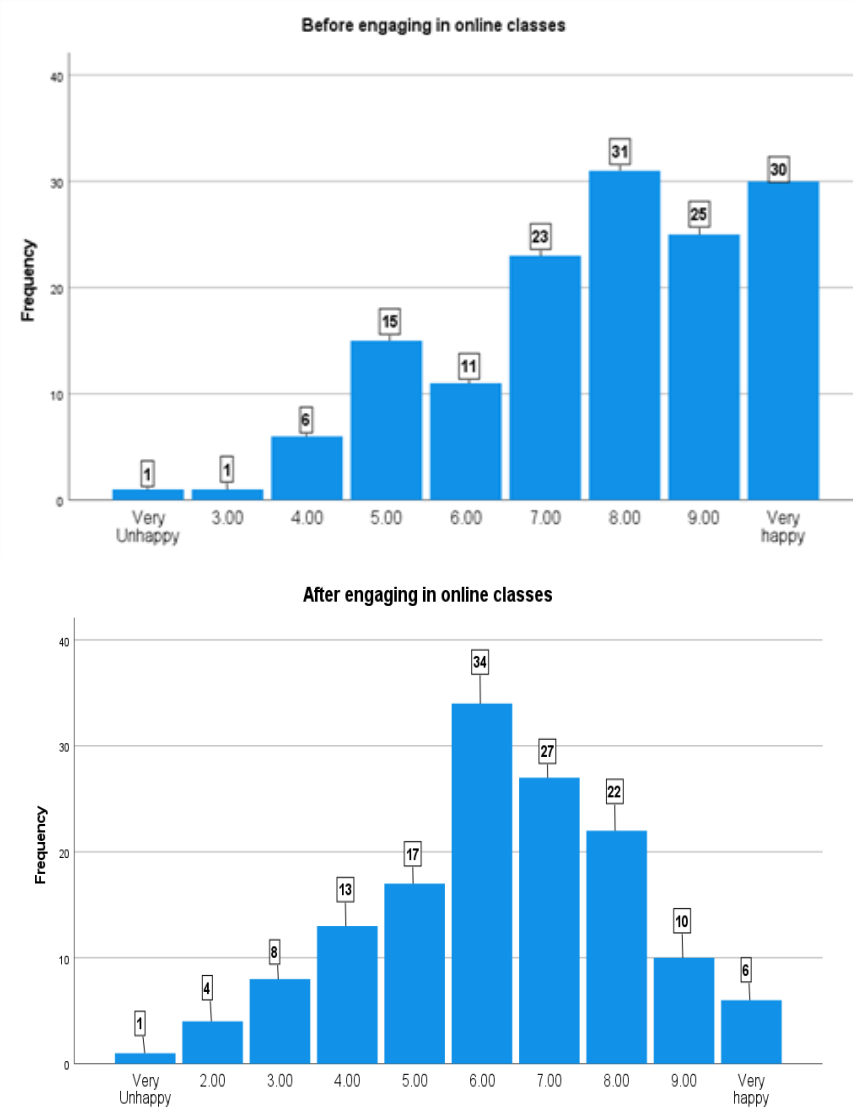


Figure 2. Students' Happiness Levels Before and After Engaging in Online Classes
Source: Researcher's own data (2021)

Regarding students' agreement with the single item—'Overall, I am happy with my university life'—on a five-point scale (from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree', the data showed that, of the 143 participants, only nine (6.3%) strongly agreed that they were happy at the university, 39 (27.30%) felt that they were happy, and 76 (53.10%) were neutral. Only four (2.8%) strongly disagreed with the statement, and 15 (10.5%) disagreed.

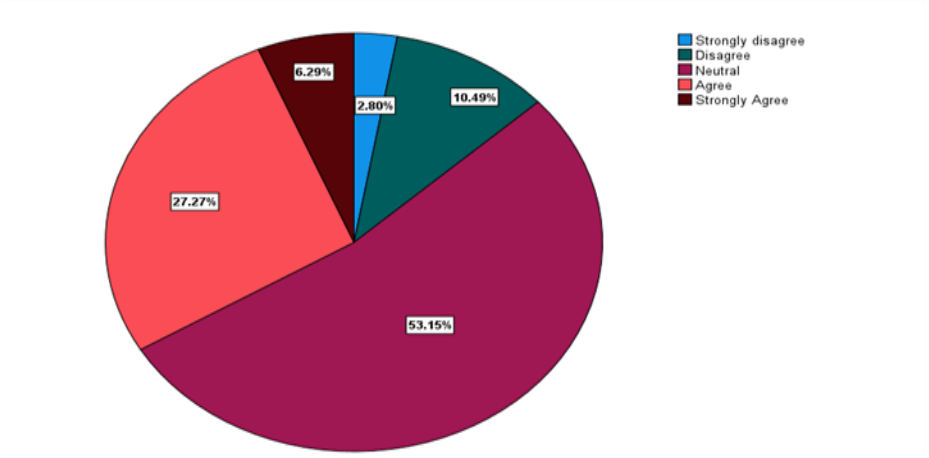


Figure 3. Students' perception of their overall happiness with university life. Strongly disagree (n = 4); Disagree (n = 15); Neutral (n = 76); Agree (n = 30); Strongly agree (n = 6).
Source: Researcher's own data (2021)

5. Discussions

The current study showed that first-year students' motivational levels declined after engaging in online courses in the seven weeks of the first semester. Unstable internet connection that often interrupted their attention and concentration may be one of the factors contributing to lowering their motivation -not every student has the same level of technical facilities and internet. In addition, adapting to the new learning environment at home with distractions such as noise and competing with siblings and other family members for computer time can also affect motivation. Therefore, they must manage their time effectively between household chores, assignments, and online exams. and this may increase their workload. According to Quirk and Quirk's (2020) study, one-third of students commented that their workload sharply increased, which may lead to frustration and decreased motivation. In regard to happiness, the radical changes to the nature of university students' educational experience during the COVID-19 pandemic have imposed a burden on students' mental health (Browning et al., 2021). Most students confirmed that they have had issues with anxiety, depression, fear of contagion and ambivalence due to this pandemic. Generally, college students who are in their late teens and young adults are vulnerable to various academic- and non-academic-related stresses and fears (George & Thomas, 2020).

Chan et al.'s (2005) study revealed that of 246 responses, 22.8 percent of the students strongly agreed that their lives at the university were happy and 63.8 percent agreed that their lives at the university were happy, while none strongly disagreed, 4.9% disagreed and 8.5% were neutral. Students' responses of level of agreement is referred to on one-item 'Overall, I am happy with my university life'. In the current study, of 143 students, less than a half student, 48 (33.56%) stated they are happy (i.e., those who strongly agreed and agreed) with their university life. In the current study, 64 participants stated that they derived happiness through support from family, 18 (12.60%) through relationships with family and friends, 14 (9.80) received support from friends, 14 (9.80%) from listening to music, 13 (9.10%) from playing with pets, 11 (7.70), from connecting with nature (e.g., gardening, hiking), 7(4.9%) from religious activities, and two (1.4%) did not respond. These factors helped them achieve happiness despite dealing with the challenges of online learning. Terpstra-Tong and Ahmad's (2018) study proposed three important elements in dealing with negative circumstances in the university learning environment of first-year students - academic readiness, skills, and psychological factors. Attention to these elements may help students to be more resilient in dealing academic stressors and any unexpected events, such as the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.1. Study limitations

Using only one item to measure motivation and emotional levels may be seen as a significant limitation in this study. However, as Sauro (2018) pointed out, single items measures are likely adequate for some constructs such as the one-dimensional or concrete constructs that are well understood. In addition, these findings may not be generalizable to other first-year student population in Malaysia due to the limited number of participants.

6. Conclusions

The study revealed that first-year psychology students' motivational and happiness levels declined significantly after engaging in online courses brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning from home can be a bit struggle because students must also juggle their classes with housework and other academic tasks. Studying at the university is beneficial for first year students because they can fully concentrate on their academic tasks and have more opportunity to utilize academic resources, which may boost their motivation in dealing academic challenges and consequently greater satisfaction. For future study, it would be beneficial to explore students' perception of their lecturers' strategies in retaining their students' motivation and happiness levels beyond

delivering the content of lectures. This is important to ensure that students' motivation and happiness level can be enhanced and to keep students engaged actively and effectively in online learning-this mode may well have to be faced in their second semester and potentially even after the COVID-19 pandemic, as suggested by Verena (2020).

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