



The Effect of Coronavirus on Undergraduate Students in the Gauteng Province of South Africa during 2020-2022: An Interdisciplinary Assessment



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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic has affected almost every aspect of human life across the entire globe, including tertiary education. This interdisciplinary study explored how undergraduate students in tertiary institutions located in Gauteng Province of South Africa experienced and coped with the effects of the pandemic between the 2020 to 2022 academic years. The article used the Rites of Passage Concept to interpret how they transitioned from in-person learning to online learning, and from the latter to hybrid learning. It then used psychological concepts of self-efficacy, self-regulation and self-control to illustrate how they motivated themselves to continue pursuing their academic studies. To conduct this phenomenological study, the researchers used participatory observation and in-depth interviews to collect data over a three-year period. They then employed concepts from anthropology and psychology to interpret the students' experience. While recognizing its limited scope, the researchers argued that the study was able to illustrate the symbiotic relationship between anthropology and psychology in social scientific research. It is their hope that the findings of this study contribute to existing scholarship in the field of humanities concerning stressors and coping strategies.

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Publication History

Received 5th February, 2023

Accepted 23rd March, 2023

Published online 5th April, 2023

Keywords: *Interdisciplinary Study, COVID-19, Concept of the Rites of Passage, Coping Strategies*

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the coronavirus in South Africa occurred on the sixth of March 2020, and tertiary institutions were forced by circumstance to close their campuses and explore alternative modes of tuition.¹ Institutions that have been established to offer in-person tuition mutated to offering their tuition online, resulting in them becoming distance education institutions on a temporary basis. This paper is a culmination of a three-year research project that was conducted in the Gauteng Province of South Africa during the 2020 to 2022 academic years. The structure of the paper provides the overall implication of the pandemic to tertiary education in South Africa; clarifies the research methodology that was used; presents a thematic discussion of the empirical findings; and interprets these findings with concepts from anthropology and psychology.

¹ Zweli Mkhize, "First Case of COVID-19 Coronavirus Reported in SA," March 2020, <https://www.nicd.ac.za/first-case-of-covid-19-coronavirus-reported-in-sa/>.

COVID-19 Implications for Tertiary Education in South Africa

It is widely known and scientifically proven that there is still no “effective treatment available for COVID-19.”² Consequently, governments throughout the globe have resorted to implementing numerous controls to curb the spread of the virus. These measures include enforcement of quarantine, curfews and social distancing guidelines, which are commonly called COVID-19 protocols. These protocols affected all sectors including tertiary educational institutions when they were introduced by the South African government. Adherence to this protocol and the concomitant spiral of infections contributed to significant disruptions to the routines of many higher education students around the world. These entailed subjecting students who enrolled in in-person tuition institutions to receive tuition online.³ With the declaration of a state of disaster and the associated curfews, traumatized students were unable to access in-person counselling services and social support outside their homesteads.⁴⁵ These changes put students at a greater risk of developing mental illness. Some studies reported cases of depression, anxiety and sleep disturbances among higher education students during that period.⁶

The shift from in-person to online learning has also caused significant disruptions to the daily lives of many students, especially those living on campus and undergraduate students working towards completing their research projects or internships.⁷ As some of the students come from indigent backgrounds, they suffered acutely due to the inability to access on-campus counseling services offered by universities. Consequently, depriving them of essential mental health screening and interventions needed to alleviate their psychological symptoms.⁸

Furthermore, the transition from face-to-face tuition to e-learning meant that all tertiary education institutions in the country adopted and defaulted to online distance learning.⁹ This implies that students had to use their homes as places of residence and tuition with full reliance on the use of information and communication technologies to receive tuition and interact with their lecturers and fellow students.¹⁰ All these developments and their concomitant challenges inspired the authors to embark on this study that focused on undergraduate students to determine how they were affected and how they were coping during that period.

METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative design within the framework of phenomenology. The choice of this design enabled the study to extract the original accounts of the students who experienced the pandemic.¹¹ The use of phenomenology allowed the study to ascertain how the students’ experiences

² Jiawen Deng et al., “The Prevalence of Depressive Symptoms, Anxiety Symptoms and Sleep Disturbance in Higher Education Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Psychiatry Research* 301 (2021): 113863.

³ Edmond Kwesi Agormeda et al., “Online Learning in Higher Education during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case of Ghana,” *Journal of Educational Technology and Online Learning* 3, no. 3 (2020): 183–210, <https://doi.org/10.31681/jetol.726441>.

⁴ Kelly J. Turner and Rudolph Nkgadima, “TIMELINE: 10 Months of Covid-19 in SA.” IOL, January 18, 2021. Accessed January 18, 2021. <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/timeline-10-months-of-covid-19-in-sa-7120954d-e536-4f0e-a7b7-7883b026bada>

⁵ Rudolph Nkgadima and Kelly Jane Turner, “TIMELINE: A Year of Covid-19 in SA,” March 5, 2021, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/timeline-a-year-of-covid-19-in-sa-6fde1c4f-8624-462f-abda-1f05eb8a6617>.

⁶ Deng et al, *The prevalence of depressive symptoms*, 1.

⁷ Deng et al. *The prevalence of depressive symptoms*, 16.

⁸ Deng et al, *The prevalence of depressive symptoms*, 16.

⁹ Dagogo William Legg-Jack, “E-Learning of the Timber Processing and Application Course at a South African University amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 3, no. 4 (April 5, 2022): 85–100, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ejass.2022341>; Terry Anderson, “Theories for Learning with Emerging Technologies,” *Emergence and Innovation in Digital Learning: Foundations and Applications* 1 (2016), 40.

¹⁰ Valentina Arkorful and Nelly Abaidoo, “The Role of E-Learning, Advantages and Disadvantages of Its Adoption in Higher Education,” *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning* 12, no. 1 (2015): 29–42.

¹¹ Heath Williams, “The Meaning of ‘Phenomenology’: Qualitative and Philosophical Phenomenological Research Methods,” *The Qualitative Report* 26, no. 2 (2021), 381.

of the pandemic shaped their ordinary everyday practices.¹² Consequently, the findings in this study present the lived experience of these students.¹³ In order to receive these experiences, data was collected through interviews with five students from four universities in the Gauteng province, and participant observation was undertaken in one university and one home that has two undergraduate students. This implies that triangulation was used in data collection. The use of triangulation is in line with scholarship that posits that it enables the study to produce knowledge that goes beyond the knowledge made possible by one approach.¹⁴

Interviews with open-ended questions were used to harness the flexibility to explore the complexity and rich nature of experiences for the purpose of generating an in-depth appreciation of this phenomenon.¹⁵ The flexibility of the instrument also helped the study to understand this phenomenon from the perspective of the respondents, unlike if a questionnaire with closed-ended questions had been used.¹⁶ Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, a convenient selection of undergraduate students was done who were interviewed via voice calls. The participants were limited to undergraduates because the pandemic affected them just as the first-year students were adjusting to the new environment and included the rest of the undergraduates to get a comparative perspective.

All data were analyzed thematically, using themes that were from the empirical data themselves, not theoretical concepts. This was necessary as the study did not move from a theoretical orientation but from the detailed description of a central phenomenon from the participants' experiences.¹⁷ Theories from anthropology and psychology were only used to interpret the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section provides a narrative of the research participants' stories and findings from participant observation from both authors. These are presented thematically.

Online Classes

One reality that confronted the students was the need to live with the sudden change in their daily routine due to the pandemic. Among other things, this change involved a sudden transition from in-person tuition to online education. This transition was well narrated by one of the participants who was in her first year in 2020. She related that she had just started her first year at the university and was busy acclimatizing to the use of university facilities when the disaster struck. She passionately explained how she enjoyed using her student card to access amenities on campus, including the student's residence. Then she immediately frowned, as she recalled how that experience suddenly came to a sudden halt. This halt was triggered by a communique received from the university's vice chancellor commanding all students to vacate the campus and their student residences as classes were cancelled indefinitely.

The response to this news triggered various reactions and subsequent actions from the students. Some cried for help as they did not have money to pay for travel to their respective homes. Others were disturbed mentally as student residences provided relief from their poverty situation at home. Some of those who expressed psychological shock recounted that they did not know how long the situation would take as they wanted to finish their education in time to get out of situations like overcrowding at home, inadequate meals, unreliable water supply and so forth.

All these challenges were compounded by the need to cope with online classes. For instance, it took a while for students from poor households to receive smart devices and data. Likewise, some

¹² Williams, *The Meaning of Phenomenology*, 293.

¹³ Julie Frechette et al., "Capturing Lived Experience: Methodological Considerations for Interpretive Phenomenological Inquiry," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020): 1609406920907254.

¹⁴ Uwe Flick, "Triangulation," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (California: Sage, 2018), 444–61, 452.

¹⁵ Edward John Noon, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: An Appropriate Methodology for Educational Research," *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* 6, no. 1 (2018), 80.

¹⁶ Doris Fuster, "Qualitative Research: Hermeneutical Phenomenological Method," *Propósitos y Representaciones* 7, no. 1 (2019), 201.

¹⁷ John Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (California: Sage Publications Ltd, 2014).

students from well-resourced families expressed challenges in the area of self-management and the struggle to forego home-based social activities that clashed with their academic timetables. Research participants from all backgrounds were also frustrated by their lecturers' limited skills to offer online classes during the early stages of the pandemic.

Hybrid classes

Following the suspension of the academic year, all campuses were closed for a few weeks. Others were partially opened to accommodate specific academic needs as the lockdown regulations were relaxed because of improved response to the pandemic. This improvement included the rollout of the vaccination programme and the implementation of a stringent coronavirus prevention protocol. Consequently, it became possible for institutions to consider other options to offer tuition in addition to online classes. Hybrid classes became another option.

Research participants highlighted that at the height of the hard lockdown, their institutions were in communication with them updating them about what the university was doing to fill the tuition void created by campus closures. All participants indicated that it did not take long before their respective institutions introduced online classes. Some of the institutions remotely loaded data on the students' smart devices in order to facilitate online learning. Other participants stated that their institutions resorted to a hybrid model from the onset on a need basis. They reported that their institutions offered classes online, but practical modules had to be attended on campus. Mixed reactions were received regarding this approach. There was an outcry from some participants who had to commute from their homes to campus on the days they were supposed to attend practical courses. They complained about travel costs and the risk of infection as they used public transport.

Some universities kept to online tuition until the government relaxed the lockdown conditions. In other words, it meant that these universities offered full online classes during the 2020 and 2021 academic years. For these institutions, blended or hybrid classes began in 2022 during the first semester and full-contact classes began in the second semester of the same year. Another form of hybrid classes entailed receiving recorded lessons which students may unlimitedly watch later as and when they need the content.

Associated Challenges

As alluded to in the previous sections, nothing was smooth sailing in the entire process. The transition from contact to online classes created different challenges for various students. The nature of these challenges ranged from socio-economical, and technological to psychological threats. From a socio-economical perspective, some participants complained about the lack of dedicated study rooms at home due to overcrowding, the unaffordable cost of smart devices, travel costs associated with blended or hybrid tuition mode, disturbances from other members of the homestead and inadequate food at home. In addition, this situation has also deprived students, particularly first-year students an opportunity to get to meet and socialize with new people. They only had this chance during their third year, and this has reportedly created stranger anxiety and asocial behavior.

Some of the technological challenges cited by participants include inadequate free data, poor connectivity, and inappropriate smart devices. All these challenges contributed to adverse psychological effects on the participants. Some participants perceived and experienced the entire situation as stressful. Although they reported various stress levels, those who had contracted the virus and/or lost their next of kin to it stated that they found it difficult to cope with the alternative mode of tuition. While none of the participants reported having sought psychological counselling, their accounts highlighted the severity of the situation.

In addition to the above challenges, some participants alluded that the transition from face-to-face classes to online and hybrid learning environments exposed their technical deficiencies to operate Information Technology devices and the requisite applications. Furthermore, all participants complained about the high workload. Blaming it on their lecturers, one of the participants said: "All the lecturers seemed to have thought that the students don't have anything to do. So, the workload felt [became] much worse as there was always something due, even during public holidays and weekends."

This lament seems justifiable as some participants openly said that they had to do more reading and listening to the study material with little opportunity to seek and receive instant clarity from lecturers. In this way, they felt that lecturers were earning a full salary while doing less. Some of them went to an extent of stating that they deliberately opted to register with institutions that were established to offer face-to-face tuition as they believe that information is grasped easier in person than online. Thus, the online tuition method deprived them of this option. Similarly, some participants blamed their poor performance on the situation as it catalyzed their difficulty to adjust to university and online learning at the same time.

Online Tuition Benefits

Regardless of the above-mentioned challenges, the participants commended the situation for several concomitant benefits. As part of the deliberation on the benefits, some participants extolled the resultant online lectures for flexibility and adequacy of study material. Regarding flexibility, they mentioned the ability of students to forego instant class attendance for later indulgence in the recorded material they received from lecturers. Another form of flexibility highlighted by participants relates to freedom of class attendance in a non-prescriptive dress code or venue. For instance, the situation afforded the students an opportunity to attend classes in their pajamas anywhere in their places of residence. Therefore, online classes did not inflict the considerations of time constraints in terms of physical preparations for classes. This is contrary to the conditions of face-to-face classes that latently impose the need for a socially acceptable dress code and budget for time to move from one class to another, one respondent said.

There were also claims by some participants that online classes forced lecturers to prepare comprehensive learning material to compensate for the limited possibility to respond to students' questions adequately and instantly. In addition, some lecturers distributed this material in advance enabling the students to prepare properly for their lectures. Some participants also applauded the situation for forcing them to learn new skills. In his own words, the participant said: "The transition from contact learning to learning to online learning helped me to hone my IT skills, [while simultaneously] keeping me updated with the current technological systems in place."

Post Lockdown Adjustments

The participants recounted both positive and negative experiences with the adjustment from online learning to contact learning. Students without on-campus residences complained that the costs of travelling to and from campus weighed heavily on their pockets. A few students complained about the long hours they spend commuting to and from campus. In terms of the social aspect of post-lockdown, some participants reported that they were thrilled to be back on campus as it gave them an opportunity to socialize more often and get to know their lecturers. Academically, students reported that it was a lot easier to collaborate on group assignments as issues like poor network connectivity became a past struggle; students were now able to make use of the facilities (for example, the library discussion rooms) to meet up with their group members. Asking questions in class was easier as well because lecturers did not have to read a myriad of questions on the discussion chat as they did during online classes. A few students reported that their academic performance improved tremendously. However, some students noticed a dip in their academic performance as they were no longer accustomed to essay and paragraph type questions as most tests were conducted in a multiple-choice manner during online learning.

The transition from online learning to contact learning was advantageous to one particular participant as it caused her academic performance to improve. She felt that multiple choice questions were not the best for math related modules as calculations did not need to be typed out and thus calculation method marks were not awarded. However, she stated that adjusting to the social aspect of the university was difficult.

Application of the Rites of Passage Concept to Interpret Student Experience during COVID-19

This concept was introduced to the field of anthropology by Arnold Van Gennep in his seminal work, *Les Rites de passage*, in 1909. Later on, Victor Turner borrowed and expanded upon Van Gennep's work and contributed to its widespread usage not only in anthropology but also in other fields as well.¹⁸ At its inception, Van Gennep conceptualized and published it in French in 1909 and later translated it to English in 1960.¹⁹ Since then, this concept has undergone important changes, mainly because of Victor Turner's role in promoting and adapting it. Turner, who was regarded as Van Gennep's greatest protagonist in the 1960s made the model much more abstract, shifting focus from passages to three successive stages, namely separation, liminality, and integration.²⁰ In this paper, the authors use these three stages to interpret the experience of students during the transition from face-to-face learning to blended tuition models and back to a face-to-face environment in the height of COVID-19 between 2020 and 2022. As they are aware that this concept has evolved over the years, they will therefore blend its original thought with contemporary adaptations across various disciplines. Furthermore, despite significant differences between the traditional remote communities and contemporary society, the term Rites of Passage is still used to explain people's understanding of contemporary transitional experiences.²¹

Separation

Separation is the first stage of a rite of passage and it involves the detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point.²² This detachment involves both the psychological build-up to leaving a state as well as the actual physical withdrawal.²³ When the pandemic reached South Africa, the students had to be separated from their usual routines at short notice and this had an adverse psychological effect on the students. Some had just found campus life so hospitable and conducive to their needs but had to evacuate it. The instant change of events meant that they had to readjust their routine to suit their situations in their various homes.

The Separation phase was not homogenous. For instance, first-year students who stayed in student residences experienced a state of separation as they transitioned from living with their families in their hometowns to living in the midst of people who all had the same goal, i.e., obtaining a degree. They then had to adjust to taking charge of their lives with minimal supervision from their next of kin. As they were learning to acclimatize to an environment where learning social skills from interaction with peers became a norm, the pandemic forced them to another separation, whereby they had to maintain a social distance and eventually stop attending physical classes.

For non-first-year students who were residing on campus, the separation that has been described above meant that they had to abandon habits and pastimes that complemented their academic welfare. For example, some had to cease playing sports which they regarded as a destressing pastime, while others had to attend religious celebrations or services online.

Another extreme stressor that affected both first years and non-first-year students was relocating back to their family residences. In this regard, those who had already adapted to an academic life away from home had to regress.

Unlike in the case of the classical application of this concept, the covid-19 pandemic was not predetermined. Therefore, conditions of transitioning from older ways of doing things in this regard

¹⁸ Lawrence George P Garcia et al., "Betwixt and Between: Exploring the Liminal Space of the 'First Generation' Filipino Physician Through the Lens of the Rites of Passage," *Journal of Medicine, University of Santo Tomas* 5, no. 1 (2021): 564–71, 565.

¹⁹ Rob Wiseman, "Getting beyond Rites of Passage in Archaeology: Conceptual Metaphors of Journeys and Growth," *Current Anthropology* 60, no. 4 (2019): 449–74.

²⁰ Wiseman, *Getting beyond rites of passage in archaeology*, 450.

²¹ Orla Byrne, "The Rites of Passage of Business Failure: A Socialized Sensemaking Approach," in *Work Life After Failure?: How Employees Bounce Back, Learn, and Recover from Work-Related Setbacks* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), 61.

²² Victor Turner, Roger D Abrahams, and Alfred Harris, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Routledge, 2017), 94.

²³ Byrne, *The Rites of Passage of Business Failure*, 61.

had no clearly outlined guidelines or procedures. Consequently, there was no shared knowledge, understanding, and expectation of what the experience is like or what should be done, and there are no elders or mentors guiding the way.²⁴ Despite this challenge, some students were guided through their changing circumstances by academic mentors and supported by their communities. These support services encourage healing, growth, and learning through sharing their experiences with others,²⁵ either at home, in church or online.

Liminality

The word liminality is derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold.²⁶ In Turner's perspective, the liminal phase may be likened to invisibility, darkness, and being in the womb in which an initiate is naked and possesses nothing. Turner explains that at this stage, class and ranks disappear, and initiates become equal facing the same challenges and consequences.²⁷ In the case of the students facing the consequences of COVID-19, students from different levels of their years of studies were all experiencing this pandemic for the first time. For instance, first-year students could not rely on senior students for guidance on how to navigate the whole situation because all of them were experiencing it for the first time. All students resembled initiates to the situation of confusion, anxiety and uncertainty. Their situation was characterized by some level of uncertainty and liminality experienced by patients that are diagnosed with incurable health conditions.²⁸

In its conventional use, the concept of liminality was applied in environments that involved transitions which were both an obligatory and temporary experience, unfolding within a defined period of time and leading to a new, clearly identified social status.²⁹ However, in the case of COVID-19 students were in a state of perpetual flux because the end date of the pandemic was not known. Although they all viewed the situation as temporary and understood their evacuation from their campuses as obligatory, the uncertainty about its end date was unsettling.

The above uncertainty stressed the student and this state of affairs were compounded by the use of masks, gloves, social distancing and other forms of protocols which were previously foreign to them. These changes and expectations in the community constituted the liminal symbols of the pandemic. This is consistent with the original concept of liminality insofar as the role of symbols is concerned. In liminality, symbols condense meaning, unite and may also divide.³⁰ The division was noticed in the use of masks whereby some people refused to wear them while others were strictly adhering to wearing them. Therefore, the usage of masks was uniting the citizens, but causing division at the same time. This was also experienced on campus when students returned to their institutions.

Reincorporation

This is the last phase whereby one has a new status that entails a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.³¹ While the acquisition of a new status was not a central characteristic of the situation in the case of the students, they experienced it in a latent manner. As they experienced reincorporation when they were sent home by their institutions, they assumed the status of distance learning students. This was a challenge to them as they had to temporarily do away with the campus culture of co-existing with people of similar age groups. Another form of reincorporation that they experienced was when they returned to their various campuses. At this stage, they acquired the status of hybrid students of distance learning and in-person tuition. In both transitions, students

²⁴ Byrne, *The Rites of Passage of Business Failure*, 62.

²⁵ Byrne, *The Rites of Passage of Business Failure*, 66.

²⁶ Garcia et al, *Betwixt and Between*, 565.

²⁷ Turner, Abrahams, and Harris, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 95.

²⁸ Stephanie Dauphin et al., "Using Liminality and Subjunctivity to Better Understand How Patients with Cancer Experience Uncertainty throughout Their Illness Trajectory," *Qualitative Health Research* 30, no. 3 (2020): 356–65.

²⁹ Byrne, *The Rites of Passage of Business Failure*, 62.

³⁰ Fraser G. McNeill, "'Original Venda Hustler': Symbols, Generational Difference and the Construction of Ethnicity in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Anthropology Southern Africa* 39, no. 3 (August 31, 2016): 187–203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2016.1209725>.

³¹ Turner, Abrahams, and Harris, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 95.

were still wearing masks in public. In this regard, they never retained the previous attributes of mixing with fellow learners without a mask.

With incorporation, students had new clearly defined rights and obligations and were expected to exhibit and adhere to norms and ethical standards associated with their new social position or state.³² As reflected in the previous paragraph they experience it on two occasions. When they evacuated their campus, they had a right to study from home and had to use technology to do so as they became distance education students. As the country upholds the right of young people's access to education, learners had a right to a smart device and data in order to further their studies under the circumstances. In the instance when they returned to their campuses, they assumed the rights of in-person learning students whereby they regained access to the campus amenities and services like Wi-Fi, library, student residence etc.

In non-traditional societies and in this case of students, incorporation includes becoming psychologically and physically engaged in a new role.³³ The students had to undergo such a process on both occasions. When they evacuated their campuses, they had to readjust to live and study in environments that were not prepared for tuition at the time. In addition to this challenge, the sudden role of a distance education learner also brought a psychological challenge of loss of concentration due to noise and expectations from family members. Some students were required to unconditionally assist with errands. In some cases, family members like children will continue to play nosily and senior members would expect students to do household chores even when the students are preparing for major academic obligations.

COPING MECHANISMS

The transition from one state to another has led to many stressful experiences for many students. Research participants expressed some psychological challenges such as anxiety about the future. Anxiety contributed to some students struggling to retain their motivation to continue with their studies. Participants expressed a concern that they were anxious about the loss of a social environment in the academic milieu which for years has been a support system that enabled them to learn in effective ways.³⁴ As scholarship notes that education thrives in three environments, namely the family, school, and community environments,³⁵ the pandemic collapsed the school environment, giving rise to some level of anxiety among some students. This situation called for the students to develop mechanisms that were aimed at hiding or alleviating the stressors that gave rise to anxiety.³⁶ As psychology literature reveals, defense mechanisms manifest in a continuum from adaptive to pathological.³⁷ Research participants expressed signs of being in an adaptive mode. Analysis and interpretation of their coping mechanisms highlighted the contribution of the unwitting application of self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-control and motivation.

Self-efficacy

This concept was developed by Albert Bandura in his social cognitive theory to refer to an individual's belief about his/her capabilities to accomplish specific tasks.³⁸ He identified it as the dominant self-

³² Byrne, *The Rites of Passage of Business Failure*, 65.

³³ Byrne, *The Rites of Passage of Business Failure*, 66.

³⁴ Nova Asvio, "The Influence of Learning Motivation and Learning Environment on Undergraduate Students' Learning Achievement of Management of Islamic Education, Study Program of Iain Batusangkar In 2016," *Noble International Journal of Social Sciences Research* 2, no. 2 (2017): 16–31, 19.

³⁵ Asvio, *The influence of learning motivation and learning environment*, 19.

³⁶ Siqi Fang, Man Cheung Chung, and Yabing Wang, "The Impact of Past Trauma on Psychological Distress: The Roles of Defense Mechanisms and Alexithymia," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020), 2.

³⁷ Tommaso Boldrini et al., "Defense Mechanisms in Adolescents at High Risk of Developing Psychosis: An Empirical Investigation," *Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process, and Outcome* 23, no. 1 (2020).

³⁸ Md Saadat Hussain, Sadaquat Ali Khan, and M C Bidar, "Self-Efficacy of Teachers: A Review of the Literature," *Multi-Disciplinary Research Journal*, (2022), 110.

perception shaping action, effort, and achievement.³⁹ These self-perceptions are not inborn but develop as habits.⁴⁰ They are reinforced as the individual witnesses his/her capacity to perform a particular task.⁴¹ In this study, self-efficacy is limited to the students' confidence to perform and achieve their academic tasks in various settings as dictated by the pandemic.

While research participants have raised a few stumbling blocks to their academic success, they raised a few points that suggested that they had strong beliefs in themselves. Some first-year students indicated that they had already developed some level of independence while they were in high school whereby, they had to conceive and execute projects with minimal support from their parents or teachers. They, therefore, construed that all that they needed was to put more effort into the tertiary institution given the magnitude of the work. In that way, their self-perception backed by previous performance gave them the drive to carry on with their work during the pandemic. While not all of them realized a hundred percent success rate as some had proceeded to the following year with supplementary exams, all participants never repeated the year of study.

Self-regulation

Another psychological concept that proved to have latently emerged as a coping mechanism among some participants is self-regulation. Self-regulation may be loosely described as the core characteristic of human functioning that helps facilitate the successful pursuit of personal goals.⁴² In other words, it serves as a source of inspiration that entails the process of determining a desired objective and then taking action to move toward it while monitoring progress along the way.⁴³ As a psychological coping mechanism, self-regulation involves the regulation of one's thoughts and emotions to drive his/her actions toward the achievement of the set goal. In this regard, it can be regarded as an umbrella term that includes a wide range of "goal-relevant activities, such as deciding which goal to pursue, planning how to pursue it, implementing these plans, shielding goals from competing concerns, and sometimes even abandoning goals."⁴⁴ In order for a person to successfully use self-regulation to garner motivation to work towards the set goal, the individual has to modify his/her thoughts, and feelings in alignment with his/her ambition.

While no participant used this concept in their responses to the question on how they coped with the demands of the transitions related to the pandemic in their lives, the articulation of their coping mechanisms denoted that they unwittingly applied this concept. Many of them indicated that they were deliberate in implementing measures that contributed to their academic achievements. Some of them indicated that they had developed a schedule or timetable that they followed in order to maintain a work-life balance while at home as they had used on campus. This included among other things, scheduling time to live online classes and/or listening to the recorded tuition content, studying for tests and examinations as well as attending to household errands. Therefore, it is evident that they had to use cognitive self-regulation which entails "planning what to do first and what to do next, monitoring progress towards a goal and redirecting actions that prove unsuccessful."⁴⁵

Online learning was a form of self-study; students had to plan their own days, many got to choose when to watch their lectures and so on. However, many students' cognitive self-regulation also suffered during this time as many reported that they could not pay attention due to distractions at home. Those that overcame these distractions reported a strong sense of modifying their thoughts and feelings about their geographic location. One student stated that although she was based at home, she fought the distractions by imagining her homestead as a university residence whereby fellow students had

³⁹ Michael S Zelenak, "Developing Self-Efficacy to Improve Music Achievement," *Music Educators Journal* 107, no. 2 (2020), 42.

⁴⁰ Karin S Hendricks, "The Sources of Self-Efficacy: Educational Research and Implications for Music," *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 35, no. 1 (2016), 2.

⁴¹ Dap Louw and Anet Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development* (UJ Press, 2014), 360.

⁴² Michael Inzlicht et al., "Integrating Models of Self-Regulation," *Annual Review of Psychology* 72 (2021): 319–45, 319.

⁴³ Inzlicht et al, *Integrating models of self-regulation*, 321.

⁴⁴ Inzlicht et al, *Integrating models of self-regulation*, 321.

⁴⁵ Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 366.

different programmes to follow. She just had to focus on her schedule and remained single-minded to her set goal. This demanded a lot of self-control.

Self-control

A growing body of research indicates that self-control is critical to academic success.⁴⁶ This study has somehow supported this postulate as all research participants explicitly vocalized the use of self-control or just control in their responses. While this term is defined differently across research traditions,⁴⁷ in this paper, it refers to internally driven control of thoughts, feelings, and actions in the midst of enduringly valued goals that co-exist with briefly more gratifying goals.⁴⁸ In other words, actions that one takes to pursue his set goals that require taking decisions to forego or avoid actions that will result in temporary satiation.

In this study, research participants shared examples of how they exercised self-control during lockdown while studying online from home. One participant shared that self-control for him meant skipping family traditions that they cherish, e.g., requesting to be excused from family dinners during the week. One participant acknowledged that dinner table chats are refreshing, and he stated that he had to discipline himself by pretending that he was on campus during the week. He joined family dinners during the weekend as if he had visited the family for the weekend. Another participant who stated that he is a fitness fanatic shared that for him self-control meant that he had to reduce socializing time but could not afford to temper with his jogging schedule. He stated that self-control for him meant tailor-making one's personal commitments to suit the constraints of the time. In his elaboration, he stated that exercising is an integral part of his academic schedule as he uses it to refresh his mind and to maintain a healthy lifestyle that he perceives indirectly contributes to his academic agility.

These two participants' responses illustrated that students used different ways to exercise self-control, and still achieve the purpose of "one goal over a second goal when the two come into conflict."⁴⁹ Both participants chose to partially forego or reduce indulgence in actions that lead towards the second goal, i.e., socializing with family members. In that way, they applied certain principles to resolve conflicts.⁵⁰ Such actions stand out in terms of depicting the students' attempt to self-control and illustrate the application of this concept in coping with the psychological challenges related to the pandemic. In alignment with the definition of this concept, participants demonstrated that their use of this coping mechanism was self-initiated and deliberately vocalized the importance of the goal of academic success as the primary goal over any other personal goal(s), regardless of the secondary goal's attractiveness.⁵¹

Motivation

A closer examination of the application of the above three concepts illustrated that research participants had to attain some form of motivation in order to stick to these coping mechanisms. Over the years scholars have defined the concept of motivation in a variety of ways. From the various definitions that the authors came across, it became clear that motivation is "fundamental to human agency,"⁵² and may serve as a condition that energizes or de-energizes human behaviors toward the achievement of certain goals.⁵³ Literature clarifies that those sources of motivation may be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic

⁴⁶ Angela L Duckworth et al., "A Stitch in Time: Strategic Self-Control in High School and College Students.," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 108, no. 3 (2016), 2.

⁴⁷ Angela L Duckworth et al., "Self-Control and Academic Achievement," *Annual Review of Psychology* 70 (2019), 375.

⁴⁸ Duckworth et al, *Self-control and academic achievement*, 374.

⁴⁹ Inzlicht et al, *Integrating models of self-regulation*, 321.

⁵⁰ Inzlicht et al, *Integrating models of self-regulation*, 322.

⁵¹ Duckworth et al, *Self-control and academic achievement*, 376.

⁵² John Hattie, Flaviu A Hodis, and Sean H K Kang, "Theories of Motivation: Integration and Ways Forward," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 61 (2020).

⁵³ TuongVan Vu et al., "Motivation-Achievement Cycles in Learning: A Literature Review and Research Agenda," *Educational Psychology Review* 34, no. 1 (2022): 39–71, 41.

motivation comprises engagement in a behavior that is inherently satisfying or fulfilling,⁵⁴ while extrinsic motivation is about the performance of a behavior that is instrumental in nature.⁵⁵

The research participants' responses explicitly illustrated that their desire to study and effort to prioritize were fueled by their personal ambition to complete their academic goals as a doorway to access material possession. One of the final-year students who participated in this study clearly indicated that the pandemic was frustrating her academic goal. This goal relates to graduating in order to access the labor market to earn a salary for the purpose of getting her family out of poverty. Another participant stated that she did not go to university to derive pleasure from gaining knowledge for the sake of sounding intelligent but she needed the knowledge to be able to "make a difference out there in exchange for a salary."

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The study findings presented the narrative of student coping mechanisms during COVID-19. Several selected themes were discussed and linked to the rites of passage concept. In summary, it was evident that research participants who expressed various forms of frustration never had access to counselling during this process. However, they showed some resilience by using all forms of coping mechanisms which the study interpreted using theories from psychology. While this study was limited to the Gauteng Province of South Africa, these findings may be beneficial to conceptualizing similar studies elsewhere.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that:

- Tertiary institutions should develop adequate in-house capacity to handle mental health issues of this nature in the future. In line with this, more Guidance and Counselling centres should be provided to assist students when the need arises.
- Further investigations of this phenomenon are to be considered in other geographic areas of South Africa and other countries to compare these findings.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated the use of an interdisciplinary approach to investigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on undergraduate students in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. It used the concept of rites of passage from anthropology to describe the situation and concepts from psychology to interpret their coping mechanisms. It argued that the pandemic offered the students an opportunity to experience the rites passages from in-person learning to online learning and to hybrid learning. As this transition occurred, they experienced psychological challenges which they navigated through self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-control in order to remain motivated academically. The study was able to achieve its goal to apply triangulation in data collection and the use of concepts from anthropology and psychology to interpret the findings. The rites of passage concepts from anthropology were used to describe the stressors while psychological concepts were utilized to articulate the coping mechanisms that the participants used.

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⁵⁴ Lisa Legault, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation," in *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 1–4, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8_1139-1.

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