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## THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MOROCCAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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**Abstract :** The COVID-19 pandemic, first identified in Wuhan, China, was first confirmed to be present in Morocco on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2020. It swiftly took hold in Moroccan society and spread like wildfire. This led to a surge in deaths, those needing extra and intensive care, and generalised anxiety amongst the population. There was perceived dissatisfaction in how the Moroccan government was handling the crisis, and accordingly, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March, schools and universities were closed until further notice. Education was then conducted remotely on Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, via email and other platforms. This study examines how final-year undergraduate university students felt during this period, and how they felt that the (ongoing) COVID-19 pandemic has affected them, their lives and their studies. This study is important, as the pandemic is ongoing, and despite vaccination efforts, there is the potential for new variants to come into existence and to cause for a recurrence of the issues faced by university students and the wider society to which they belong. It is also in that this area of research is under-researched because the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, and that the issues faced by Moroccan university students and general population are tremendously neglected in academic literature, particularly in English-language literature. Therefore, this study examines the concerns, worries, grievances and anxieties of Moroccan final-year undergraduate students, and sheds light on a population sample that is often neglected and forgotten.

**Keywords:** Morocco, COVID-19, Students

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## INTRODUCTION

Morocco confirmed its first case of COVID-19 [SARS-CoV-2] on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2020, when an individual in Casablanca tested positive for the virus. Subsequently, the number of cases swiftly increased, and the virus permeated through every segment of Moroccan society. The coronavirus spread rapidly from the epicentre in Wuhan, China (linked to the Huanan (Southern China) Seafood Wholesale Market) and then across the entire world (Li *et al*, 2020). There have since been millions of infections, and also million deaths as a result of the virus.

Substantial anxiety was felt by most people around the world as a result of the virus, its potential to cause harm and even death. Xiao *et al* (2020), cited by da Silva (2020) stated that “not only affected the physical health of infected patients but also the psychosocial health of the uninfected world population, increasing depression, stress, and anxiety”. Students are well known to be particularly vulnerable to anxiety, depression, stress and other dissatisfaction with life, and this is heightened compared to the general population (Mojs *et al*, 2012). Accordingly, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have an even more profound impact on the lives of students than the general population. As per Browning *et al* (2021), when the mode of their educational provision and daily schedule are uprooted and radically and swiftly changes, such as the need to shelter in place, quarantine, become subject to quarantine or isolation procedures, or lockdowns, the potential impact on mental health is severe, and the potential mental health burden is substantially amplified. Many studies support this idea, and it is safe to say that the COVID-19 pandemic has been detrimental to the mental health of individuals around the globe (Panchal *et al*, 2021).

Morocco is at the crossroads of civilisation. It is located in North Africa, in the MENA region. Whilst there are many open, touristic and liberal areas, it remains to be a society which is deeply rooted in traditions, the Islamic faith, and long-held cultural norms and values, many of which hold the force of law. Higher education in Morocco is not accessible to all, owing to the cost implications. Those who do attend university often come from a family from a reasonable financial standing. The university experience in Morocco is challenging, stressful and difficult, as stated by Kumar (2021). There is a high level of burnout, exhaustion and disengagement amongst Moroccan university students, and in some cohorts, as many as 93% reported exhaustion, and 33% reported legal and illicit drug use to help them cope, in 2019, prior to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lemtiri Chelieh, 2019). With the COVID-19 pandemic disrupting everyday life, and universities having been closed, there is likely to have been implication on the mental wellbeing of students. Morocco is not a homogeneous country, and is made up of Arabs, Berbers/Amazigh, sub-Saharan Africans and other groups. All of which may be affected by the pandemic in different ways. Almost, social standing,

family background, wealth, access to resources and varying levels of familial support can have profound implications.

This is an important piece of research given the ‘once in a lifetime’ nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the social, cultural, political and economic upheaval caused. Given that the pandemic is still ongoing, this research will shed essential light on the most common concerns raised by participants and is likely to assist in forming a clearer picture on how best the pandemic can be handled, and the most common concerns that need addressing. MENA populations appear to be underreported in English-language literature, and this study goes some way in addressing this issue. The experiences of MENA groups, such as this study (on Moroccan University students), ought to be given greater validity and afforded respect.

## **METHODS**

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, only a small sample of 42 final-year undergraduate students from Marrakech, who attend various universities, and were participated in qualitative semi-structured interviews, on a one-on-one basis was possible. Express permission was obtained prior to scheduling a date and time for the interview and agreeing on which platform it was to be conducted. It is understood that this will have implications on the validity of the study, due to the small sample size. Notwithstanding this, the study will gain an insight into the views of genuine students in Morocco.

The null hypothesis must be that the COVID-19 pandemic has had no implication on the mental health of students. The author feels that this is unlikely to be the case. The first alternative hypothesis is that the COVID-19 pandemic has improved and/or benefitted the lives of the participants (Moroccan students). The second alternative hypothesis is that the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted the lives of the participants (Moroccan students).

Each student was interviewed using a semi-structured interview, which took place either over Zoom, Skype or WhatsApp video call, at a pre-scheduled time, convenient for both parties. This method was chosen for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, they allow for the collection of a wide-range of data, which is qualitative and open-ended, which allows for participants to share their thoughts, feelings and emotions- something that was a key aim of the study. Accordingly, it facilitated delving deeper into highly emotive personal issues, and allowed for a greater insight into participant thoughts and facilitated the sharing of resources. It also allowed for the building of a rapport between researcher and participant. The participants were made up of 26 female students and 16 male students.

This method was chosen over others such as a questionnaire with thoughts and feelings rated on a Likert Scale, because this would be inadequate and not provide sufficient insight into thoughts, feelings and emotions. Also, the raw quantitative data that would be produced

would not adequately help to address the question posed, nor shed light on authentic student experiences. Additionally, it is difficult to quantify emotions that fluctuate, and that there is no objective yardstick for emotions and experiences. The researcher felt that this was the most appropriate method of obtaining data from participants, and that data could be corroborated and triangulated between the participants, who attend different universities in the Marrakech region.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

In this study, the participants were made up of 26 female students and 16 male students. They were all final-year undergraduate students who attend different universities in the Marrakech region. They were all undertaking a course of study on a variety of subjects. Each student was individually interviewed using a semi-structured interview, which took place either over Zoom, Skype or WhatsApp video call, at a pre-scheduled time, convenient for both parties.

The null hypothesis was that the COVID-19 pandemic has had no implication on the mental health of students. The first alternative hypothesis is that the COVID-19 pandemic has improved and/or benefitted the lives of the participants. The second alternative hypothesis is that the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted the lives of participants. Accordingly, open-ended questions were asked to ascertain how participants felt that their lives were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most common theme was that life had become more isolating, and that they felt more anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic. It had provoked anxiety, fear, worry, concern, social isolation and increased feelings of helplessness in 72% of participants. Participants reported that they felt that there was no real end or solution in sight, and that the lives that they had been relatively comfortable with had been chasmically and radically changed by the virus surging through society. They were happy that the vaccination roll-out was doing well, but generally understood that they were part of a low-priority group due to the low risk of serious medical harm of the virus to young adults with healthy immune systems. Participants reported that they were worried about the future prospects, exams, graduation, employment, friends and even the desire to marry, but that COVID-19 might be an impediment to it. They had all reported being unable to do things that they wanted.

Participants who reported no substantial change in life (14%) stated that they were generally insular and introverted, and that this COVID-19 pandemic provided respite from the rigors of social living. Also, the participants had previously spent a lot of time being isolated by choice, so there was little change in their daily habits. For those who stated that life had improved (14%), the participants felt that the COVID-19 pandemic gave them a break from the stresses of daily life at university and with friends and challenging relationships

such as harsh, abusive and/or picky partners. Also, it had lifted the burden of having to attend classes most days, many of which were unevenly spread through the day. Moreover, some of the reported benefits were that they felt that classes were a waste of time, and in the modern world, they can learn just as well at home and in comfortable surroundings. Those who felt that life had improved acknowledged that others in society were negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and issues such as panic buying and lockdowns could be problematic.

The fact that most participants felt that life had got worse is not surprising. Existing literature documents that there have been numerous adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic apart from the immediate medical/clinical effects on those directly suffering symptoms of the virus. The second alternative hypothesis, being that the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted the lives of Moroccan students can generally be taken to be valid for the majority of participants.

	Males	Females	Total
No substantial change	3	3	6
Life has improved	2	4	6
Life has got worse	11	19	30
Total sum			42

Table 1 : Implication about Covid-19 toward students

## DISCUSSION

The main findings of this report was that the overwhelming majority of Moroccan final-year undergraduate students felt anxiety, fear, worry, concern, isolation and helplessness because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was expected and seems to be a common theme through the entire population. The student population is particularly vulnerable to stress, anxiety and depression, but many do not know who to talk to about their feelings, and many do not feel able to do so because 'others are worse off'.

Anxiety is a common phenomenon to experience where there are environmental changes, perceived changes, or the expectation of changes (Asmundson, 2019). This is not surprising in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with quarantine, lockdowns, having to wear a face mask, not being able to contribute in large groups and being subject to other restrictions. Depression, fear, being worried and stressed are also reasonable symptoms to have expected.

As was reported by participants, as they were at home for substantial periods and unable to go out due to the lockdown, many spent many hours on their mobile phones and computers/ electronic devices browsing social media such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook

etc. This was both to pass time, attempt to reduce boredom and keep abreast of COVID-19 developments. With conflicting information, 'fake news', untrustworthy chain messages and a barrage of opinions, it is not surprising that stress and anxiety was provoked (Ferreira & Borges, 2020). Even accurate information has the ability to be anxiety-provoking.

Additionally, as detailed above, many were fearful of catching the COVID-19 virus themselves, and also transmitting it to others, who may be more vulnerable to more serious symptoms and adverse medical sequelae. When mixed with anxiety and fear, even a cough, tiredness, muscle pain or other generally more benign symptoms can be mistakenly identified as COVID-19. As per Corbett *et al* (2020), this is even more pronounced in clinically vulnerable groups such as pregnant women. It is arguable that as students are more susceptible to anxiety, stress and depression, these symptoms may be even more fear-inducing than the remainder of the population. Further to this, daily habits can be changed by exposure to the media, especially the government and health agencies, who recommend hand washing as a way of avoiding the virus. The ability to become obsessive about this is heightened. Conversely, if the danger and transmissibility of the virus is minimised, there is the potential for the public to not be worried or concerned about the virus and their laxity might enable the virus to be spread more widely and to have a more profound effect on society in the long run (Wheaton *et al*, 2012). Many confuse their symptoms with having COVID-19, which demonstrates the high level of anxiety that the participants face and is also a common theme amongst the general population.

Whilst high levels of anxiety are present within Moroccan university students (Kumar, 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic was not foreseeable in that there was a profound and imminent risk to the population of the world. Accordingly, it was not foreseeable by Moroccan universities and healthcare providers, as well as those who provide mental health care. The initial lack of efforts in this regard cannot be attributed to poor planning, and mental health services have been inundated worldwide (Woolston, 2021).

Social distancing and social isolation has been a common theme during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Kingdom of Morocco is no exception to the vast majority of countries and recommends social distancing. However, hospitals swiftly filled up and 78% of Moroccans feel as though the health system cannot cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. As per Cimini and Chalafaout (2020), "the lockdown's unsustainability further aggravates social precarity" and that "awareness of the national healthcare's structural deficiencies" has increased significantly. Thus, the need to engage in social distancing is even more important. The psychological impact on the participants was profound, and most said that they missed being able to generally 'hang out' with friends, enjoy shisha in larger groups, watch football in the stadiums and the 'old normal'.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study uncovers the fact that there has been a profound impact on society caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moroccan university students are part of wider society and feel the typical ramifications of the pandemic, but also feel ramifications arising from their student status. Already being susceptible to stress and anxiety, the pandemic has elevated the likelihood of this taking place. Therefore, universities and mental health care providers need to do more to allow students to express themselves and raise their fears and concerns. Furthermore, it is necessary for universities to signpost students to services that they may need.

Some segments of society, such as nurses, feel pride based on their valuable contribution to society. This is an essential coping strategy. Students do not receive this level of praise, and need to find coping strategies themselves, as well as to depend on others such as family members, friends or their peers/classmates. Negative methods of coping including drinking alcohol, which can exacerbate mental health problems and is often condemned in Moroccan society, or by taking illicit drugs, which is condemned, illegal and can be even more destructive. The American CDC (2020) states that “It is natural to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry during the COVID-19 pandemic” and encourages checking in on others and helping them when necessary.

The results of this study, albeit obtained from a small sample, are consistent with results from similar studies conducted elsewhere, such as in by the CDC as mentioned above, Singapore, Poland and Switzerland. With increased isolation and reduced social interactions, students appear to be at a higher risk of suffering from negative effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to protect the public. Whilst it is extremely important to ‘flatten the curve’ and reduce the rate of COVID-19 surging through society, the reduction of social outlets and social interaction can have a profound impact on the lives of students, as evidenced by those who participated in this study. Accordingly, the onus is now on the government of the Kingdom, as well as regional and local authorities, in addition to universities, to be pro-active and take steps to safeguard the mental health of students, as well as to safeguard the mental and physical health of wider society.

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