

Combating Social Isolation and Loneliness in Online Distance Learning: Lived Experiences of College Students



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Aira Jessa B. Palisoc¹ and Agnes Kryza H. Sito²

¹Saint Louis University, Baguio City, Benguet, Philippines

²Benguet State University, La Trinidad, Benguet, Philippines

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ABSTRACT. The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online distance learning (ODL) intensified social isolation and loneliness globally, particularly among college students. This study explores the experiences of nine university students in Baguio City who face these challenges. Through semi-structured interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the research reveals students struggle with their psychological well-being, the emotional impact of ODL, and demanding academic adjustments. However, students also develop coping strategies and seek support, ultimately viewing ODL as an innovative learning environment. These findings highlight the need for educators and policymakers to reassess current practices and implement strategies that support the holistic development of students in the evolving digital landscape.

1.0. Introduction

Distance learning (DL), encompassing online learning and e-learning, has become an increasingly prevalent mode of education. It involves the physical separation of teachers and students who utilize various technologies to interact and facilitate the learning process (Adam & Metljak, 2022). This educational approach gained significant momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic when traditional face-to-face classes were disrupted, forcing educational institutions to adopt new technologies and instructional strategies.

The shift to DL, particularly online courses, has presented unique challenges, especially in terms of student well-being. While DL offers flexibility and accessibility, it can also lead to feelings of loneliness and social isolation, particularly among young learners (Labrague et al., 2021; Ecang & Petalla, 2022). These feelings are exacerbated by the inherent human need for social connection and interaction (Mawadha & Yulianti, 2023).

Loneliness, a subjective experience of dissatisfaction with the quality or quantity of social

relationships (Taylor, 2020), has been linked to various mental health issues like depression and anxiety (Mann et al., 2022). It can trigger a vicious cycle where feelings of loneliness lead to social withdrawal, further increasing isolation (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018; Shamay-Tsoory & Kanterman, 2024).

Social isolation, an objective state of limited social contact and engagement (Taylor, 2020), can be mitigated through increased awareness and behavioral change. In terms of prevalence, however, this often requires support from others (Machielse & Duyndam, 2020). Research has shown that young individuals are particularly vulnerable to loneliness due to the instability of their social networks and ongoing identity exploration (Barreto et al., 2021).

Despite the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation among students in DL environments, interventions specifically targeting this issue remain relatively unexplored. This highlights the need for focused research to identify effective strategies for reducing loneliness and promoting social connectedness in online learning settings. This research aims to address this gap by examining the experiences of college students, a population particularly susceptible to loneliness (DiJulio et al., 2018). The findings will inform the development

*Correspondence: airajessa97@gmail.com

Aira Jessa B. Palisoc, Saint Louis University, Baguio City, Benguet, Philippines



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of age-appropriate and acceptable interventions to mitigate loneliness and social isolation among students engaged in DL.

Hence, this study seeks to enhance the understanding of the socio-emotional challenges associated with DL and contribute to the creation of supportive online learning environments that foster student well-being. The insights gained will be valuable for educators, mental health professionals, and educational institutions in their efforts to provide effective support services and promote positive learning experiences for students in the digital age.

2.0. Methodology

Research Design. This study employed qualitative research methodology and used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the unique experiences of loneliness and social isolation among ODL students in higher education.

Participants and Sampling Technique. The study employed a snowball and purposive sampling method to identify potential participants who met the specified inclusion criteria: a) young adults with an age bracket between 18 to 25 years old, b) Filipino citizens to localize the sample, c) enrolled in one of the three universities in Baguio City, d) with at least one-year ODL experience, e) having significant feelings of loneliness and social isolation during the pandemic. One hundred forty-five students who satisfied the inclusion criteria completed the UCLA Loneliness Scale III (UCLA-3 Scale) as an online pre-screening tool for loneliness and social isolation. Of these, 58 students achieved a cut-off score of >43, qualitatively described as *high loneliness*. Nine participants consented to participate in the interviews, with four selecting face-to-face formats and five choosing online platforms, in consonance with Moser and Korstjens' (2018) assertion that the needed sample size for a phenomenological analysis should be less than ten interviews.

Instrumentation. The UCLA Loneliness Scale Version III (Russell, 1996) was used as a pre-screening tool to identify students with feelings of loneliness and social isolation. It is a self-report questionnaire that returns values for subjective feelings of loneliness.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to understand the lived experiences of students who grappled with feelings of loneliness and social isolation during ODL. Content validation was done by research experts who evaluated the questions based on criteria.

Data Collection Procedure. For the face-to-face interviews, participants were scheduled in private, distraction-free environments to facilitate open

dialogue. During the sessions, informed consent was reiterated, and the purpose of the research was clearly communicated, allowing for a natural flow of conversation. Notes on non-verbal cues were also taken to enrich the data collected.

In contrast, the online interviews required careful selection of a reliable virtual platform, with clear instructions provided to participants to ensure a smooth experience. Similar to face-to-face interactions, informed consent was obtained digitally via Google Forms, and the discussion was guided by a semi-structured format that allowed for flexibility. The Google Meet platform was utilized for the interview and necessary clarifications, which lasted for an average of 40-50 minutes, ensuring comprehensive engagement.

Data Analysis. After the interviews—both in-person and online—the recordings were transcribed for analysis. The researcher used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze the data. Specifically, the analysis underwent six phases of treatment under the method of Smith and Osborn (2007), which included the following: 1) initial case familiarization, 2) identification of themes, 3) finding connections between the themes, 4) producing the table of themes, 5) reviewing the analysis, and 6) writing of the report.

Data Trustworthiness. The rigor and trustworthiness of the analysis were maintained through the implementation of member-checking techniques. The researchers independently coded the interview transcripts using orthographic transcription, with each word captured verbatim. Additionally, investigator triangulation was employed to enhance the validity of the findings, involving collaboration with three co-raters who met specific qualifications, including a master's degree in Psychology, experience in qualitative research, and a minimum of two years of expertise in interpretive phenomenological analysis validation.

The co-raters also engaged in document analysis as a data generation method, utilizing the research transcripts as significant sources of qualitative data. This process included discussions to achieve consensus on interpreting participants' statements and reconciling any divergent perspectives pertinent to the study. The combination of interviews and document analysis provided a robust framework for triangulation, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. The final themes emerged from a thorough and meticulous examination of the data.

Ethical Consideration. Before data gathering, the study procedure underwent rigorous ethical evaluation by the Saint Louis University Research Ethics Committee (SLU-REC). The study involved

participants who anonymously participated and provided informed consent. Furthermore, the study adhered to the Philippine Data Privacy Act (Republic Act No. 10173), ensuring that data was kept confidential and only visible to the researchers. Participants were allowed to review findings before publication, and hard copies were kept secure for the researcher to access only. After the completion of the research, the audio files and hard copies of the interview were discarded, ensuring utmost confidentiality in the research process.

3.0. Results and Discussion

Five main themes encapsulated the lived experiences of the participants. These include exhausting academic adjustments, emotional toll of ODL, imperiled psychological well-being, adaptive strategies and help-seeking behaviors, and ODL as a innovative educational landscape.

Exhausting academic adjustments

With the abrupt shift of learning modalities from face-to-face to ODL at the height of the pandemic, students encountered significant difficulties that initially challenged their capacity to cope. The interview with the participants revealed varied challenges experienced with the setup of the ODL modality:

My experience in ODL was quite challenging; it was like a roller coaster ride. It was hard for me to keep up each day because it was a new setting of learning modality. Besides, there were many adjustments to make. I was still adjusting during that time. (Seraph, online interview, June 17, 2023)

It was very hard for me to keep up each day because the setup of ODL was very sudden. I felt very lonely and isolated because it was my first time experiencing it. (Danzy, online interview, July 2, 2023)

Everything was new to me... like speaking... our lack of familiarity with the platform. We were challenged with that learning mode. Activities were done through Google Docs, and I would say to myself, "I do not know how to do this." There were

also times we did not know how to submit... We had activities like calculus and math; it was quite difficult for us to the point that we wanted to give up. We told each other, "I do not like this anymore; I want this to end. (Raven, online interview, July 8, 2023)

To be honest, my first ODL was difficult because we were so used to studying in the classroom, and there were so many changes and adjustments that we needed to make. (Quasar, online interview, July 18, 2023)

While those in primary education and undergraduate levels could adapt quickly to digital technologies, students found it tricky to keep up with the pace of learning, and other technical issues significantly affected their performance (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2020). Conversely, students also had to invest their time in understanding the technology to keep up with online learning while feeling the internal burden of class preparation and the constraints of the quality of the classes (Huang & Yoon, 2023). Another factor that adjusted challenging was the workload. Rahiem (2020) found that when students feel they have too many class assignments and activities, the adjustment process becomes even more taxing.

Decline in academic performance and motivation. Among the participants, the modality's impact on academic achievement was apparent. Some admitted that their comprehension levels and grades declined since the commencement of ODL:

Assignments were too difficult, and I became too lazy to do them. So, there was a time when I was not supposed to enroll in college because I needed to have ODL again. I lost the motivation to go to school. (Seraph, online, June 17, 2023)

Ma'am, this is ODL's impact on me. When I was in elementary school and junior high, I had honors, but then again, because of ODL, it seemed like the impact on me was different; my ability deteriorated. My grades started to drop... One more thing I felt was the loss of motivation to do activities. (Mavey, online interview, July 19, 2023)

This adverse impact of ODL further caused a

ripple effect as findings revealed that many students' academic performance decreased. While Fisher et al. (2021) assert that students taking online courses earn only slightly lower grades than students taking in-person courses. Rutkowska et al. (2022) describe a decline in the students' willingness to acquire knowledge. Seong and Andriessse (2024), who used a two-pronged multi-level strategy to analyze youth well-being in Iloilo Province during the COVID-19 epidemic, found that inadequate learning opportunities and a lack of social connections among pupils posed serious problems. They further contended that e-learning has a detrimental effect on students' knowledge levels, resulting in lower academic scores.

Emotional toll of online distance learning

While the students faced academic hurdles during their online distance learning experience, they also experienced other emotional challenges. This superordinate theme primarily describes varied emotional difficulties, such as a lack of emotional authenticity, pervasive feelings of loneliness, and social isolation.

Feelings of loneliness and social isolation. By its very nature, online learning is something that students undertake independently. Although there are chances to participate in communal lessons and discussions, students will spend most of their study time alone. The limited social interaction offered by online learning could be highly isolating and even cause feelings of loneliness.

I was a transferee then, so I had no circle of friends and felt isolated. It is just like I was all alone (referring to classmates), focused on their circle, so I felt isolated and alone. It is just like I was all by myself. (Mirage, face-to-face interview, June 20, 2023)

Well, if it is online, you feel alone. You do not see anyone; you cannot see your classmates. (Lynx, face-to-face interview, July 4, 2023)

Being by myself was really draining because I would only hear my thoughts and opinions. There was nobody else that I could be with except myself. (Raven, online interview, July 8, 2023)

(Referring to family) we were not that close at that time. That is why, during the lockdown, I could not talk to anyone; I could not call anyone. It was really different; it was like I was

all alone. The pandemic got to me. If it is online, you are alone. You have no one to talk to; you see no one, and you cannot see your classmates. The surroundings are weird. The school and home environment are very different. (Mavey, online interview, July 19, 2023)

Learning online results in isolation and loneliness (Maphalala et al., 2021). Kaufmann and Vallade (2022) further asserted that a "crisis of connection" and a "loneliness epidemic" even became more prevalent because of the extended times of online distance learning. Despite the presence of communication channels via the Internet, forging social connections among geographically distant learners may be challenging as it results in isolation once the transaction is completed (Núñez & Cuisia-Villanueva, 2020). These imply loneliness can be attributed to several contributing factors, such as coping difficulties, limited physical presence, and lack of emotional intimacy.

Interestingly, it is not only a here-and-now experience. Hawkley and Capitanio (2015) added a long-term perspective to these feelings as students who receive instruction remotely may experience negative repercussions in the future as an offshoot of feelings of isolation.

Lack of emotional authenticity. Students struggled with expressing and managing emotions during Online Distance Learning (ODL), as they only saw classmates via screens and communicated through online platforms, causing difficulty in distinguishing authentic emotions and identifying peers' feelings.

One of the things I have noticed is that you cannot really feel the authentic vibes of your peers if you are online... so when you are online, it is like all that disappears; it is like it is just flat, and you have to guess their feeling or their emotions... it is as if you will only talk for the sake of filling the void that you cannot really feel. The social cues cannot be felt even with the presence or use of emojis online. (Mirage, face-to-face interview, June 20, 2023)

You cannot tell or express your true emotions online. If a person chats with you, you cannot tell if he/she is mad or happy, unlike in person, you can see the social cues of people. It is so hard to feel how other people feel. (Aether, face-to-face interview, July 7, 2023)

Expressing and identifying real emotions online is challenging at best, even with emoticons

and emojis. Understandably, with connectivity and bandwidth issues, video and audio options were not always used. When cameras and microphones are turned off, it is very challenging to see nonverbal responses from participants (Liu & Lin, 2024).

The concerns surrounding students' social interactions and mental well-being in distance learning emerged as a significant area of research during the later stages of the pandemic (Liu & Lin, 2024). This focus on social interaction and mental health is encapsulated within the framework of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL encompasses how individuals acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to foster a healthy personality. It enables individuals to empathize with others, take responsibility for their decisions, achieve personal and collective goals, and effectively manage their emotions (Liu & Lin, 2024).

Imperiled psychological well-being

According to Pangngay (2023) and Echang and Petalla (2022), mental health is a vital component of psychological well-being and is essential for academic performance, particularly for emerging individuals. However, even before the pandemic, the increasing prevalence of mental health concerns was already problematic, especially among students. The challenges during ODL during the pandemic, on the other hand, did not only affect students' academic goals but drastically impacted their mental health and well-being.

The participants disclosed that home confinement and the bulk of academic load resulted in manifestations of mental-health-related concerns, such as anxiety, depression, and trauma, illustrated by the following responses:

I feel very isolated. It is like I really do not know anyone. I could not ask anybody about the activities. It was like I was all alone... Actually, every day, I would feel very anxious, and I think it resulted in me finding the experience of the past 2 years traumatic because there were times that I encountered problems that appeared to have no solutions. Aside from being anxious, I was traumatized to the point that I really did not attend our graduation. I did not want to meet my teachers and classmates because I had a very bad experience with the ODL. (Mirage, face-to-face interview, June 20, 2023)

I felt very anxious, and I felt that this resulted to, it is like...I find my experience very traumatic. (Danzy, face-to-face interview, July 2, 2023)

We were tasked to compile a report of

sorts on how the students were doing during the ODL; if I am not mistaken, there were a thousand respondents. Upon reading those transcripts, I realized it was hmm. Very depressing. I even cried while reading it because some students had it worse than me. It is tough when you already feel down, and then your companions are the same, so like you are one big group of depressed people. (Inkwell, online interview, July 9, 2023)

ODL had a significant impact on the student's mental health, producing burnout, anxiety, and depressive symptoms because of the activities given by their professors (Giray et al., 2022). Having an environment devoid of meaningful personal interactions further compounded the concerns. For instance, a lack of interaction with others brought about common disorders like anxiety, panic attacks, and depressive symptoms (Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020). In the Philippines, students were more vulnerable to poor mental health compared to adults, partly due to their shift to remote education during the pandemic (Alibudbud, 2021). This then implies that their mental health is really at stake. Unfortunately, these mental health concerns have not been prioritized as much.

Some participants also disclosed that they discontinued engaging in self-care measures due to the academic workload required in asynchronous classes. They experienced sleep deprivation, and their time for rest and leisure was significantly reduced owing to many school requirements.

There were times during OD when I could not take care of myself physically, so it is like when I wake up, I immediately grab breakfast while doing school work until late at night. I do not leave my table just to finish the pile of requirements. So, I do not have time to rest and even exercise already." (Inkwell, online interview, July 9, 2023)

So that is when my brother and I started staying up online. You know what? We would go to bed at midnight, sometimes at 1 am, and most often until 2:00 am. (Danzy, face-to-face interview, July 2, 2023)

Inexplicably, because of their academic pressure and drastic societal changes, most students in the research also struggled to exercise the physical aspects of self-care, including eating healthily, exercising, and engaging in mind-body practices. This could have been detrimental as self-care was found to lower psychological distress among students,

even during the COVID-19 outbreak (Cleofas, 2021; Ecang & Petalla, 2022).

Despite an increase in the burden of mental health challenges among students during the implementation of ODL, the Philippines still contends with a stark lack of mental health professionals and resources. Therefore, it is essential to explore measures and intervention strategies for students that could help mitigate the harmful effects of stressors from online distance learning.

Adaptive strategies and help-seeking behavior

Despite the multiple challenges, students employed various coping strategies to address their loneliness, social isolation, and the new academic demands of the shift to ODL.

Enhanced self-study and research skills. The participants who have experienced academic adjustments and challenges utilized independent self-study and enhanced research skills to adapt to the learning difficulties encountered in the new learning modality.

If I do not understand my professor's lessons, or if they are not available, or if they do not seem to reply immediately and the office hours or days they say, I just search on YouTube or Google on how to do this activity. (Mavey, online interview, July 19, 2023)

The ODL did not help me mentally, but academically, it improved my self-study and my ability to comprehend tasks alone without the help of my teachers. (Seraph, online interview, June 17, 2023)

In view of the hurdles to learning effectively in an ODL setup, students strived to enhance their research skills. Batbaatar and Amin (2021) emphasized that asynchronous classes in ODL enable learners to develop their skills at their own pace and necessitate that students consistently finish tests without relying on face-to-face interaction. They acquire a sense of accountability when they complete the module's assigned responsibilities. They possess empowerment since there are greater chances of learning independently (Batbaatar & Amin, 2021).

Students' voluntary efforts and self-direction were more taxing than offline learning, and they may have made multiple errors during their online learning experiences. Nevertheless, they incorporated various action/interaction techniques to develop their learning flow. Specifically, they started to effectively organize their learning after realizing that online learning was preferable to offline learning in terms of absorption and focus (Huang & Yoon, 2023).

Leveraging online communication platforms. In dealing with socialization, communication, and emotional upheaval problems encountered in ODL, students leveraged online communication platforms. They optimized different communication platforms online to alleviate feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

I chatted with them through F.B. messenger. Of course, we need courage because we already need help. (Lynx, face-to-face interview, July 4, 2023)

There was this app that I used. It was Discord. I used this to alleviate feelings of loneliness and social isolation. You can be very anonymous on Discord. You can be whoever you want, which has also helped me. We can interact through online communications; that is how it is. (Aether, face-to-face interview, July 7, 2023)

Disjointed communication and interactions have been one of the most adverse effects of ODL, leading to an increased sense of loneliness, social isolation, and impaired psychological well-being among students. Thus, students optimized the usage of various online communication platforms to develop and maintain interactions with their classmates, teachers, and even families. One area in which students felt particularly empowered was technology, such as having access to Zoom for direct communication during faculty meetings, classes, and social gatherings. These features helped students become more socially engaged, reducing feelings of loneliness (Bowman & Crowe, 2023).

Future-directed cognition. Some participants shared that they used future-directed cognition to cope with the transitions of learning modality and manage negative emotions such as loneliness and social isolation. This way, the participants re-appraised their negative experiences in ODL.

I think the biggest lesson that I learned from my ODL experience was that there are battles in my life that I need to conquer independently. With the help of ODL, I realized that sometimes, I should learn how to do things alone. (Danzu, online interview, July 2, 2023)

It helped me grow as a person, wherein I could say no to social gatherings, I could be by myself, and interact with others without getting tired. I learned about myself during that time. (Aether, face-to-face interview, July 7, 2023)

Overall, it was a bad experience, but we cannot glorify it. Although it was a very, very bad experience, at the end of the day, our goal is to move forward. Our experience during the pandemic and ODL allows us to grow and realize mistakes that we could change in the future. (Inkwell, online interview, July 9, 2023)

Pawlak and Moustafa (2023) disclosed that future-oriented thinking is undoubtedly valuable when attempting to improve student engagement and performance in the academic setting. Despite their negative experiences in ODL, the students endeavored to maintain an optimistic outlook in their academic pursuits. This is a hopeful direction, as Segbenya and Anokye (2023) reported that people who use cognitive methods are driven to deal with obstacles when they arise rather than be distressed by them.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students had the chance to expand their knowledge of self-discipline and enhance their self-management skills through online learning. They also witnessed the development of a body of knowledge that bolstered their disciplinary thinking and conversation (Huang & Yoon, 2023).

Online distance learning as an innovative educational landscape

Despite recognizing drawbacks, participants were cognizant of the practical upsides of ODL, including lower costs and increased flexibility. The results of the interviews highlighted how students perceived ODL as an innovative learning modality.

Significant cost savings. One of the noticeable benefits includes significant cost savings associated with daily allowance and transportation among students far from school. One participant precisely elucidated this sub-theme:

Looking back, I was still renting my apartment here in Baguio, but since the pandemic began, we were forced to go home to our province because it was only ODL. That was okay at some point because I did not have to pay our rental fee, which was also expensive. I did not have to worry about transportation since it was just ODL. (Inkwell, online interview, July 9, 2023)

With constantly increasing academic costs, online programs are considered a potential alternative to conventional instruction (Thanji & Shanmugam,

2018). Moreover, ODL is a cost-effective approach that reduces travel and labor costs, reduces educational facility usage, and increases program viability using modern technologies.

Greater flexibility. ODL's increased convenience also allowed students to manage academic and personal responsibilities more effectively. This was mentioned below:

It was quite convenient for me because I was able to control my time each day. I wake up at any time of the day, and I also sleep at my preferred time. (Danz, online, July 2, 2023)

I really had to do things by myself for most of the time. I could really work on things without hindrances. (Lynx, face-to-face interview, July 4, 2023)

When it is synchronous classes, it is okay to turn off the camera. It is okay to mute the mic...so you can study even if you are just lying down, or you can do other things you need to do at the same time, like for me, sometimes when I wake up late, and we need to attend our online class, of course, I eat my breakfast at the same time. (Aether, Face-to-Face interview, July 7, 2023)

Yan et al. (2022) said that earlier works (Bączek et al., 2021; Basuony et al., 2020) highlighted the convenience associated with ODL. According to Shim and Lee (2020), students expressed satisfaction with two aspects of remote learning: First, it allowed them to spend less time traveling to and from school, which freed up time for other activities. Secondly, it enabled them to make meaningful use of the time they had previously spent traveling between in-person classes. Researchers have discovered that students are content with the flexibility that comes with learning remotely since it frees them from the stress of traveling, allows them to customize their progress to meet their schedules and speed, and eliminates the need for concerns about what to wear to class.

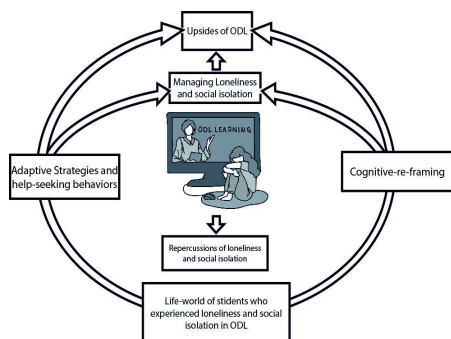
The preceding discussion emphasizes that although students experienced adverse effects from ODL, they employed their distinct combination of adaptation strategies to successfully navigate the practical and psychological challenges of remote learning. They likewise arrived at a thoughtful recognition of the practical upsides of ODL as an innovative learning landscape.

Figure 1 depicts students experiencing loneliness and social isolation due to ODL, highlighting the negative impact on their emotions and psychological well-being. Nonetheless, it further illustrates the

changes in their worldview resulting from how they strived to cope despite their encountered constraints.

Amidst facing challenges, students prioritized continuity of learning and academic goals. In doing so, they developed adaptive strategies and employed cognitive reframing to counteract the adverse effects of loneliness and social isolation and facilitate academic adjustment.

Figure 1
Life-World Model



4.0. Conclusion

The foregoing discussions highlight how the Philippine educational sector opened a new avenue of flexible learning systems with corresponding challenges and advantages. It has reduced geographical barriers and economic hurdles and increased the convenience of delivering education even to the farthest regions in the country. Also, students were given more time to spend at home, thus giving them more opportunities to reconnect with their immediate families and relatives in their homes. This has been beneficial for students, especially given the collectivistic nature and family-orientedness of Filipinos. However, while ODL has been widely adopted, its psychosocial impact on students' lives should also be considered.

Students were disconnected from their peers and instructors during the adoption of ODL because although virtual screens facilitated connectivity, they also hindered meaningful physical and social interactions. One of the most adverse repercussions was the emergence of psychological and emotional concerns such as loneliness and social isolation.

Overall, this study offers additional supporting data favoring the premise that online learning can result in social isolation and loneliness. It also highlights the cascading ramifications of students' personal, social, emotional, mental, and—most importantly—academic lives. Ultimately, the onus is on educational institutions to strive to implement safeguards to guarantee that the modality does

not deepen students' academic and psychological difficulties or jeopardize their optimum learning.

In light of this, proactive measures by school administrators can promote students' socioemotional health and well-being. It is also imperative to develop and implement workable and sustainable policies and programs that foster student resilience. This will ensure that the environment is prepared for students to develop to the fullest extent possible and ultimately succeed academically. However, these initiatives need to be innovative and grounded in evidence (Pangngay, 2024).

Another option is further experimentation with adaptable, hybrid (online and offline) educational methods, such as printed modular distance learning (Talimodao & Madrigal, 2021; Petalla, 2022). To prevent underprivileged Southeast Asian populations from falling behind, adaptable strategies should be developed to deal with the pandemic and the growing effects of climate change, such as typhoons and floods (Seong & Andriese, 2024). Likewise, incorporating online social gatherings for students via other official platforms like Student Affairs would aid in addressing feelings of isolation and loneliness (Stewart & Lowenthal, 2022).

While loneliness, social isolation, and their destructive effects could lead to negative mental, physical, and even academic consequences and loneliness as a public health concern remains understudied, combating these issues on a global scale necessitates a joint effort from educators, students, legislators, and technology manufacturers. The long-term viability of online learning hinges on strategies to help adapt to its constantly changing environment. Also, despite the study's constraints, the primary findings are consistent with the empirical evidence of learning and instruction and, therefore, may be incorporated into prospective emergency preparedness instruction alongside the creation of courses for online programs for university students who may opt to follow this modality.

5.0. Limitations of the Findings

The study has limitations involving the generalizability of findings. Particularly, this involves having a sample of only 9 participants. While sufficient for the study, it may not encapsulate the experiences of individuals from various cultural and personal backgrounds. Its limitation in terms of locality can affect its applicability to the Filipino population of students engaged in ODL as well. Furthermore, considering that the phenomenon studied coincided with an unprecedented global health crisis that taxed the emotional and psychological resources of the participants and precluded the participants from accessing coping strategies that were otherwise

ordinarily available to them, the results may vary significantly if data were to be collected longitudinally or at multiple points in time.

6.0. Practical Value of the Paper

This research provides important insights for the educational setting. Policymakers will find the study's conclusions worthwhile when evaluating options and implementing measures to address holistic development. These can also help administrators and professionals employed in support services, such as guidance counselors and school psychologists, recognize and address the difficulties that come with receiving education in virtual environments.

After identifying the primary domains of emphasis in online education, stakeholders can understand the aspects that need more attention to make SEL in distance education more responsive and inclusive for all participants (Liu & Lin, 2024). Establishing uniform emergency response team (ERT) course procedures, having instructors engage with students using synchronous and asynchronous communication methods, and encouraging student involvement can improve scenarios. However, faculty training and the subsequent institutionalization of these practices are crucial for implementing these initiatives (Stewart & Lowenthal, 2022). Digital literacy seminars may also be employed for educators and students, given that these play a vital role in enhancing students' competencies in online learning platforms.

Furthermore, school administrators could provide students with at least one week of educational and cognitive breaks to support their psychological and emotional well-being. School psychologists and counselors could design tele-mental health initiatives and psychosocial support programs for students. These programs can include webinars, virtual *kamustahan*, stress debriefing, and more. Mental health professionals could also create online proactive needs assessments or problem checklists to gauge students' well-being and to facilitate access to emotional support.

7.0. Directions for Future Research

For future research, validating the findings' relevance in other domains is crucial, given that the phenomenon is well-known but has yet to receive much attention from researchers. Changes can be examined over time, and factors like personality type, learning environment, ergonomics, and access to quality education can also be incorporated. Lastly, evaluating the effectiveness of proposed interventions for students with diverse personality types, learning conditions, and academic performance in ODL can help further address issues and improve remote learning quality.

8.0. Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

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Additional Author's Information:

AIRA JESSA B. PALISOC
airajessa97@gmail.com
2153624@slu.edu.ph
<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0901-3432>

AGNES KRYZA H. SITO
ak.sito@bsu.edu.ph
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1555-0976>