

**ICONSPADU 2021****International Conference on Sustainable Practices, Development and Urbanisation****SUICIDAL IDEATION AMONG TERTIARY STUDENTS IN  
ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT DURING COVID-19  
PANDEMIC**

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**Abstract**

Online learning is a necessity for students during the Covid-19 pandemic, but it also comes with challenges that may lead to feeling despair and depressed, and eventually suicidal ideation among students. This study looked at suicidal ideation caused by online learning among Universiti Selangor (UNISEL) Communication Department students during the pandemic. Specifically, it looked to determine the impact of online learning to students during the pandemic; to identify factors that influence students to suicidal ideation during online learning; and to analyse possible solutions to prevent suicidal ideation among students. The data was gathered using a Google Form questionnaire and received 160 respondents among UNISEL Communication Department students using purposive non-probability sampling. From the data, the study found that online learning impacted the students in many ways such as not interested in studies anymore, struggled to stay focused on the screen for long time periods, felt isolated from social circles and activities as more time are spent online. Most also agree that that online learning influenced students to suicide ideation. It also found that among others, that isolation caused by online learning, poor facilities and accessibility and economic stress at home are factors that influenced students towards suicidal ideation. Some of the solutions suggested were to strengthen financial support in the family, motivation from friends and family, counselling and mentor mentee session with students, suicide awareness campaign, active participation in social and fun activities.

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## **1. Introduction**

Covid-19 is the latest pandemic to hit the world, and its impacts can be seen in all aspects, including in our daily life and in education. The sudden and often imposed changes can cause some issues including towards mental health.

### **1.1. Covid-19 Pandemic**

When a new coronavirus was detected in Wuhan, China in late 2019, nobody expected it to leave a lasting impact. The virus, which was later named SARS-CoV-2 or more popularly known as Covid-19, is highly transmissible, rapidly spreads and continuously evolves. According to a World Health Organisation report in August 2020, the Covid-19 outbreak in Malaysia started when three cases were detected on 24 January 2020. The cases were sporadic until a religious mass gathering was held in Sri Petaling, Kuala Lumpur. The gathering was attended by around 17,000 people, mostly Malaysians. Covid-19 cases then started climbing rapidly, forcing the Malaysian government to issue a Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 March 2020. The order was issued under the Police Act 1967 as well as the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988, in which it also outlined that schools as well as higher learning institutions need to be closed due to the pandemic (Alyasa, 2020). As such, the education minister as well as the higher education minister announced that teaching and learning will be conducted online.

Specifically, the Higher Education Ministry in a statement dated 27 May 2020 announced that all teaching and learning must be conducted online, fully, until 31 December 2020. All face-to-face teaching and learning were not permitted except for several categories of students such as those necessitating using labs. However, these must follow the Standard Operation Procedures (SOP) set by the government (Ministry of Higher Education, 2020).

As with other learning institutions in Malaysia, Universiti Selangor (UNISEL) also required its teaching and learning to be conducted online fully. It was to be done on its own e-Learning platform, which uses the Moodle learning management system.

### **1.2. Suicide Ideation, Anxiety and Online Learning**

According to Harmer et al. (2021), suicidal ideations or SI, refers to thoughts, wishes and preoccupations with suicide and death. The thoughts can range from considering suicide to creating a detailed plan to commit suicide. However, it does not involve the actual act of suicide.

Yvette Brazier (2020) in her article on Medical News Today states that suicide ideation can happen when someone feels they are unable to cope with an overwhelming situation, and that overwhelming situation can happen in an online learning setting.

The pandemic raises the issue of mental health among students. As they cope with a life of limited social interactions together with learning online and the pressures related to it, many cases of suicides were detected involving students around the world. Some examples include three suicide cases in the Philippines involving students due to financial and technological problems (Sibuciao, 2020), and a case in North Kalimantan, Indonesia due to stress caused by online learning (The Jakarta Post, 2020).

Another suicide case in Bangladesh was due to parental pressure with limited online facilities. Mamun et al. (2020) mentioned a suicide pact case in Bangladesh involving a private university student and his mother, where the pair committed suicide after the student had arguments with his father. The father had insisted the student to finish online tests as “he had arranged for a broadband connection” while the student wanted to complete them on campus.

A study by Sareen et al. (2005) found that pre-existing anxiety disorder can become a risk factor for suicidal ideation and attempts. This can become a factor as to why students develop suicidal ideation especially when they may have undiagnosed anxiety disorder.

Sundarasan et al. (2020) studied the psychological impact of Covid-19 as well as the movement control orders among Malaysian university students. The study found that anxiety was experienced by students with female students were likely to experience anxiety than males. The study also found that younger students especially those between 17 and 18 years old were more anxious and those staying alone experienced the highest anxiety levels. Among the reasons cited for the anxiety were lockdowns, uncertain future due to Covid-19, remote online classes and financial constraints.

The study noted that issues to technological infrastructure, especially on poor internet connection, expectations from instructors, uncertainties related to exams and graduation, the need to balance household chores and attending online classes were some of the factors that contributed towards the anxiety related to online classes. Interestingly, the study found that academicians at tertiary institutions use the same syllabus and learning outcomes for both face-to-face learning and online learning.

An article by Lee (2020) mentioned other factors that cause stress levels to be high among students including dormitory evacuation, postponement of events looked forward by students such as graduation as well as the lost of part-time jobs during the pandemic.

Sahu (2020) also notes that the shift from face-to-face to online learning may create challenges for families due to limited computers and IT equipment available for all, especially in households that need to work from home. He also questioned about the fate of students who do not have laptops, lack of internet connection at home, as well as the learning and teaching of practical subjects.

Al-Marroof et al. (2020) found that perceived fear towards technology adoption was evident during the pandemic. However, the study found that perceived ease of use, usefulness and peer’s opinions towards the technology used, in this case Google Meet, have reduced the fear towards adoption of technology, and encouraged students to attend the scheduled classes.

Although students globally are affected by the Covid-19 pandemic (Cao et al., 2020), their psychological responses may be different due to environmental factors such as cultural differences, varying levels of Covid-19 cases across countries as well as emotional and psychological support.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Online learning increases social interaction, interest, sense of belonging, academic success, student-lecturer interaction, support everywhere learning and allow easier sharing of information. However, online learning can bring negative effects to some students such as financial problem to have computers and internet facilities, health issues such as sleep deprivation, anxiety due to the workload from lecturers as well as household chores from parents.

Most students in rural areas will be affected the most as they might not be able to attend classes or keep up with their studies due to poor internet connectivity. Some students need to do hand-on practical work for some subjects but due to online learning, they can't. These factors can cause stress and anxiety to students. Many may have suicide ideation as they feel overwhelmed by all the workload, pressure, expectations from parents and lecturer as well as the lack of social interaction due to the movement control orders.

Therefore, this study attempts to look for the factors contributing towards suicide ideation caused by online learning as well as the probable solutions to prevent suicidal ideation.

### **3. Research Questions**

The study outlined three research questions:

- i. What are the impacts of online learning during Covid-19 pandemic?
- ii. What are the factors that influence students to suicidal ideation during online learning?
- iii. What are the solution to prevent suicidal ideation?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The research is to know the effects of online learning to tertiary students during the Covid-19 pandemic, the factors contributing to suicidal ideation among students during online learning and the possible solutions from the students themselves to prevent suicidal ideation.

It is hoped that the research will help contribute towards a better policy towards online learning in Malaysia so that the students do not feel burdened by online learning. It is hoped that it will help universities to create better support systems for students such as creating online counselling, change of syllabus to cater for online learning and many more, thus creating a more sustainable learning environment.

### **5. Research Methods**

The research used the quantitative method. The tool used was an online survey, created using Google Forms, with the link shared through WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram and Facebook Messenger. The population targeted was students of Communication Department, Universiti Selangor (UNISEL), which totalled 226 students then. The sampling chosen was purposive non-probability to avoid any kind of bias. The population and method were chosen as the window for data collection was narrow, which was between end of April and July 2021.

The questionnaire was divided into five sections:

1. SECTION A: Demographic information of the respondents
2. SECTION B: Psychographic information of the respondents
3. SECTION C: Explores the impacts of online learning during Covid-19 pandemic
4. SECTION D: Explores reasons for suicidal ideation
5. SECTION E: Explores solutions to prevent suicidal ideation.

The items in the questionnaire are measured using the Likert's Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire went through a pilot study first to determine the reliability of the questionnaire before it was randomly distributed to 160 Communication Department students in UNISEL.

### 5.1. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire was analysed using the SPSS software. To meet the research objectives of the study, data was analysed using descriptive analysis (mean, frequency and percentage).

## 6. Findings

The findings from the analysis are presented in the paragraphs below.

### 6.1. Demographic

From the total 160 respondents in the study, as shown in Table 1 below, most of the respondents are female students with 52.5%, and most of them are Malay with 51.3%. Most of the respondents are Selangor residents, followed by Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan, and Penang. In addition, most of the respondents are students of Bachelor of Communication (Hons) (Corporate Communication).

**Table 1.** Demographics of Respondents

| Category of Measure | Items  | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------|--|----------------|
| Gender              | Male   | 47.5           |
|                     | Female   | 52.5           |
| Race                | Malay  | 51.3           |
|                     | Indian   | 40.6           |
|                     | Others   | 8.1            |
| Location            | Selangor   | 45.6           |
|                     | Kuala Lumpur   | 10.6           |
|                     | Negeri Sembilan  | 6.3            |
|                     | Others   | 37.5           |
| Programme           | Bachelor of Communication (Hons) Corporate Communication | 45.0           |
|                     | Bachelor of Communication (Hons) Journalism              | 19.4           |
|                     | Diploma in Communication and Media                       | 16.3           |
|                     | Bachelor of Information Science (Library Management)     | 12.5           |
|                     | Diploma in Library Management                            | 6.9            |

### 6.2. Psychographics

The respondents provide mixed feedback on most of the questions in the psychographics section as seen in Table 2. Around half of the respondents prefer online learning while half disagreed with it, with disagree topping the list. Slightly more than half of the respondents agreed (agree and strongly agree) that online learning made them want to learn more on their own. However, most agreed that online learning

impacted them negatively, and most also agreed online learning can influence students to suicidal ideation.

**Table 2.** Psychographics of Respondents

| Statements   | Strongly Disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) | Strongly Agree (%) |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|
| I prefer online learning than face-to-face class                             | 15.00                 | 31.88        | 5.63        | 21.25     | 26.25              |
| Online learning makes me more interested to study compared to physical class | 13.13                 | 26.25        | 15.63       | 25.63     | 19.38              |
| Online learning encourages me to continue learning on the Internet by myself | 8.75                  | 16.25        | 20.63       | 26.88     | 27.5               |
| Online learning also impacted me in negative ways                            | 3.13                  | 6.88         | 21.25       | 35.63     | 33.13              |
| Online learning influenced students to suicidal ideation                     | 2.50                  | 8.13         | 18.75       | 42.50     | 28.13              |

### 6.3. Impacts of Online Learning During Covid-19 Pandemic

In this section, most of the respondents agreed that online learning can cause physical health issues and majority agreed that they find it hard to focus for long period of time during online classes. As shown on Table 3, they mostly agreed that assessments are a lot more during online learning as compared to physical classes. These results show curriculum as well as teaching methods should differ between physical class and online learning.

Furthermore, most of them agreed to the statement that online learning makes them feel isolated from their social circles and activities. Finally and worryingly, most stated they agreed, with 60% strongly agreed, that online learning caused them to lose interest in studying.

**Table 3.** Impacts of Online Learning During Covid-19 Pandemic

| Statements   | Strongly Disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) | Strongly Agree (%) |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Online learning can cause physical problems such as eyes strain, obesity & back pain.    | 0.63                  | 3.75         | 7.50        | 68.75     | 19.38              |
| I struggled to stay focused on the screen for long period of time during online classes. | 0                     | 3.75         | 5.63        | 40.00     | 50.63              |
| Online learning made me isolated from family, friends and social activities.             | 1.25                  | 3.75         | 8.75        | 39.38     | 46.88              |
| Online learning has caused increase in assessments.                                      | 0                     | 2.50         | 8.75        | 36.25     | 52.50              |
| Online learning caused lack of interest in studies.                                      | 0.63                  | 1.88         | 11.88       | 25.64     | 60.00              |

#### 6.4. Factors that Influence Students to Social Ideation during Online Learning

Most of the respondents agreed that isolation caused them to feel depressed, and eventually lead to suicidal ideation, as shown in Table 4. They also mostly agreed that poor available facilities, economic stress at home, inability to understand syllabus and assessments together with high expectations from students are all contributing factors towards suicidal ideation among Communication Department students during the period of online learning.

**Table 4.** Factors that Influence Students to Social Ideation during Online Learning

| Statements  | Strongly Disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) | Strongly Agree (%) |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Isolation makes students depressed, influencing them to suicidal ideation                 | 0.63                  | 2.50         | 9.38        | 29.38     | 58.13              |
| Poor facilities/accessibility at home influence students to suicidal ideation.            | 0.63                  | 2.50         | 8.13        | 35.00     | 53.75              |
| Unmanageable economic stress at home influences students to suicidal ideation             | 0.63                  | 2.50         | 16.25       | 33.75     | 46.88              |
| Lack of education motivation influences students to suicidal ideation.                    | 0                     | 2.50         | 15.63       | 40.00     | 41.88              |
| Inability to understand syllabus and assessments influence students to suicidal ideation. | 0.63                  | 3.13         | 13.13       | 40.63     | 42.5               |
| High expectation of parents about studies influences students to suicidal ideation.       | 0.63                  | 0.63         | 14.38       | 30.00     | 54.38              |

#### 6.5. Solutions to Prevent Suicidal Ideation

When asked to provide their opinions regarding solutions to prevent ideation, most of the respondents strongly agreed (63.13%) that students must be active and involved in social activities to prevent thinking about suicide, as shown in Table 5. Most of the respondents also strongly agreed (61.25%) that lecturers should take a more active role in students' interaction by having counselling and mentor mentee sessions. This opinion may be due to the lecturers having most interaction with the students during online learning as compared to other university personnel such as the university counsellors.

Other than that, most of the respondents agreed that prevention to suicidal ideation include strengthening financial support of the family, government should involve more efforts on suicidal awareness campaigns especially for students during the pandemic, as well as constant motivation from family and friends during the online leaning period.

**Table 5.** Solutions to Prevent Suicidal Ideation

| Statements   | Strongly Disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) | Strongly Agree (%) |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Strengthen financial support in the family.                      | 0.63                  | 1.88         | 3.75        | 37.50     | 56.25              |
| Family and friends motivate the student when they seek for help. | 1.25                  | 2.50         | 5.63        | 37.50     | 53.13              |

|  |      |      |      |       |       |
|--|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| Lecturer can have counselling and mentor mentee session with students. | 0.63 | 2.50 | 4.38 | 31.25 | 61.25 |
| Government should conduct suicide awareness campaigns.                 | 1.25 | 3.13 | 4.38 | 36.88 | 54.38 |
| Students must get involved in social and fun activities.               | 0.63 | 1.25 | 2.5  | 32.50 | 63.13 |

## 7. Conclusion

Data analysis shows the research questions are answered. For the first research question, which is what are the impacts of online learning during Covid-19 pandemic?, most of the respondents agreed that online learning impacted them physically, as well as psychologically and mentally with problems such as focusing in long period of time during online learning, made them feel isolated and worst, losing interest in studying.

The second research question, which is what are the factors that influence students to suicidal ideation during online learning?, most agreed with the factors presented. This is in tally with the research by Sundarasan et al. (2020) that shows factors affecting anxiety among university students in Malaysia include financial constraints, availability of computers and Internet connection.

The third research question, which is what are the solutions to prevent suicidal ideation?, majority agreed with the solutions presented, with majority strongly agreed that taking part in social activities as well as lecturers to play a more active role in counselling may help prevent students from thinking about suicide. However, when the respondents were asked on financial support, it did not receive the same amount of agreement as other statements. This may probably due that they believe mental support is more important to prevent suicidal ideation.

### 7.1. Discussion and Suggestions

The findings show the respondents agree that there is a certain stress related to online learning as many said online learning affected them negatively. While there are many benefits of online learning such as it allows learning anywhere and anytime, the negatives of online learning should be addressed to create a sustainable learning in the near future. Facilities for teaching and learning at home should be prepared well by universities and governments, state and federal.

But most importantly, the respondents showed they want more support for their mental health than for the environmental factors. As such, a different syllabus should be prepared to enable a different, comfortable and fun online learning environment. If the physical class is 3 hours, maybe for online learning the classes can be broken into two sessions in a week.

A stronger support should be provided by universities, mainly for a better mental health of students. Maybe lecturers or the student affairs departments can organise more intimate and effective programmes such as mentor mentee, group online counselling and many more.



## 7.2. Limitations of the Study

The study was only managed to be conducted towards the Communication Department students of Universiti Selangor (UNISEL). The study should be broadened to include all public and private universities in Malaysia to see how the students are coping with online learning. This study can also be extended to include secondary students as well, since they have to cope with preparing for major examination i.e., the Malaysian Certificate of Education or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia. The study can also be implemented to teachers and lecturers to see how they are coping with teaching via online.

Furthermore, the study should also include a qualitative method via interviewing, to know the exact impacts of online learning, the factors affecting suicidal ideation as well as possible solutions for it.

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