

BEING AN UNIVERSITY STUDENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC PROCESS IN THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECT

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ABSTRACT

After the pandemic caused by Covid-19, many countries stopped face-to-face education activities and started the distance education process. Accordingly, university students left the provinces where their schools were located and returned to their families. An individual who steps into university life may have different academic, social, and psychological expectations such as specializing in the professional field, acquiring a new social environment, and freedom of individual life. It can be thought that students may have been affected psychosocially as a result of the changing education and living conditions consequence of distance education. Therefore, this study, it was aimed to examine the psychosocial status of students who went to another city to get a university education but had to return to their families' homes due to the pandemic. A total of 23 students from the Faculty of Sport Sciences; 13 female and 10 male, between the ages of 18-24, who had to return to their families' homes due to the pandemic participated in this study, in which the qualitative research method was applied. Personal information form and semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers were used to collect data. Content analysis was performed to analyze the data. As a result, it was observed that university students who had to return to their families had a decrease in their sense of belonging. They felt anxious and stressed as a result of academic, economic, and family matters, thus their motivation in life declined. In addition, it was found that they could not realize their goals and dreams regarding their social life. That is to say; they broke away from social life, got disappointed with campus life because of not experiencing it thoroughly, and lacked participation in various activities.

Keywords: Distance learning, Covid-19, university students, psychosocial change, qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the global effects of Covid-19, the World Health Organization declared a pandemic in March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). After the declaration of the pandemic, many countries stopped face-to-face education activities and started the distance education process (Strzelecki, Azevedo, & Albuquerque, 2020). Face-to-face education activities at the higher education level in Turkey were suspended in March 2020. With this decision, the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) announced that educational activities in universities would be carried out remotely (YÖK, 2020). There are approximately 8,2 million higher education students in Turkey (YÖK, 2021). It is estimated that the majority of these students study in a city other than the place where their families live. Therefore, the aforementioned students were expected to leave the cities where they studied and returned to their families after the distance education decision. An individual who steps into university life might have various academic, social, economic, and psychological expectations such as specializing in his/her field, joining a new social environment, and having freedom. It may be thought that the changing education and living conditions as a result of distance education may have affected the expectations of students from university life.

This change, with distance education becoming a compulsory practice, has forced both lecturers and students to adapt to a new reality (Cicha, Rizun, Rutecka, & Strzelecki, 2021). Therefore, it could be considered that this compulsory process change may affect the psychosocial lives of students positively or negatively. Some studies conducted to investigate the impact of these effects on students focused on the life quality of students (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomažević, & Umek, 2020; Wu, Chang, & Sun, 2020) and student mobility in the distance education process (Mok, Xiong, Ke, & Cheung, 2021). In a study examining students from a psychosocial perspective during the pandemic period, it was suggested that students experienced mild to severe depressive symptoms as well as negative emotions such as boredom, anxiety, frustration, anger, hopelessness, and shame (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomažević, & Umek, 2020; Islam, Barna, Raihan, Khan, & Hossain, 2020). It was stated that this emotional state was the result of social isolation (Asanov, Flores, McKenzie, Mensmann, & Schulte, 2021). It was concluded that a long quarantine period was associated with increased

anxiety and depression among people (Hawryluck, Gold, Robinson, Pogorski, Galea, & Styra, 2004). The Covid-19 pandemic has brought out a psychosocially chaotic situation since a dramatic increase in mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, stress, sleep disturbance, and fear was reported (Xiao, Zhang, Kong, Li, & Yang, 2019; Gritsenko, Skugarevsky, Konstantinov, Khamenka, Marinova, Reznik, & Isralowitz, 2020). Besides, most of the students expressed that their workload increased due to distance education (Barada, Doolan, Burić, Krolo, & Tonković, 2020). There are also some studies showing that students tightened their ties with family members and friends during the social isolation period (Olmos-Gómez, 2020).

Because of all the psychological and social changes mentioned above, the changes experienced by university students during the Covid-19 pandemic and how their expectations about university life were affected have become important questions to be answered.

Motivation is one of the factors that affect participation and continuation in distance education. It was stated that there are differences in terms of motivation between the students who started distance education later on, and those who took distance education classes from the beginning of their university education (Pasion, Dias-Oliveira, Camacho, Morais, & Campos, 2020). As the researchers stated, the need to adapt to different working conditions in a short time, as well as the lack of experience in working online, could lead to a decrease in participation in the process. This situation brings the idea that the educational life of the students might have been adversely affected during the distance education process. Investigation of the psychological and social conditions of students whose educational life was affected negatively due to the process is important in terms of the efficiency of the distance education process.

As mentioned above, it can be thought that the psychosocial life of the students may have been affected due to the mandatory change in conditions and leaving their houses or dormitories, and returning to their families. It was observed that previous studies on this subject focused on variables such as quality of life, student mobility, and psychological symptoms. The fact that the psychosocial status of the students who got back home due to the Covid-19 pandemic was not fully investigated, further increases the importance of the results to be obtained from this research. It is expected that the results of the study will shed light on researchers working in the field of education and psychology, and offer suggestions for increasing the quality of the distance education process. This research aim is to examine the psychological and social state of university students who returned to their families as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic which paved the way for distance education.

METHODS

A total of 23 FSS (Faculty of Sports Sciences) students, 13 female, and 10 male, studying at Gazi University Faculty of Sports Sciences, participated in this research voluntarily in which the qualitative research method was applied. Participants were selected among students who left the city of their families for university education but had to return to their family homes due to the pandemic. Participants are between the ages of 18-24. Ethics committee approval was obtained by the Gazi University Ethics Committee before the research was conducted. Phenomenology design was used in the study. In phenomenological studies, sample selection and application strategies are in a very narrow range and all participants in the sample must have experienced the studied phenomenon (Rolfe, 2006). Qualitative studies generally work with small samples that are interlocked in their context and analyzed in depth (Miles & Huberman, 2016: 27). Phenomenology samples are generally selected from a group with a certain characteristic (Staruss & Corbin, 2014). Researchers conducting phenomenological research generally prefer the purposeful sampling method, as they need items that have experienced a particular phenomenon (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). For this reason, the participants in this study were selected by the convenience sampling method, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods. For the reliability (coherency) of the research, the opinions and suggestions of two experts other than the researchers were provided.

To collect data, a personal information form and a semi-structured interview form that was prepared by the researchers were used. To determine whether the questions in the interview form are understandable and clear, a trial interview was conducted with three FSS students apart from the students participating in the research. In the interview form, there were questions prepared to determine the psychological and social effects of being a university student during the pandemic process. In terms of the reliability of the research, it was mentioned that the identity of the students would be kept confidential, the research questions were asked, and the interview was recorded. The answers given by the participants were later transcribed. Instead of the names of the participants, the participants were coded as P1, P2,....P23.

To analyze the obtained data, descriptive analysis and content analysis were applied. The main purpose of content analysis is to reach the concepts that can explain the data obtained. Yıldırım and Şimşek (2013) stated that the basic process in content analysis is to bring together similar data within the framework of certain

concepts and themes, and they should be arranged understandably and transferred to the reader. The answers given by the participants to the questions in the semi-structured interview form were examined and analyzed, and codes and themes were created from all these data.

RESULTS

As a result of the content analysis made in line with the opinions of the university students who participated in the research, the results of the participants' expectations of university life (Table 1) and the situation they were in due to the pandemic (Table 2) were provided. The themes of psychological state and social state of the students were obtained (Table 2).

Table 1. Students' expectations from university life.

Psychological Expectations		Social Expectations	
Gaining self-confidence	P4, P5, P9, P14, P15, P16, P19, P22, P23	Establish a wide social environment and circle of friends	P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P15, P16, P17, P21, P22, P23
Self-realization	P1, P2, P4, P6, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P18, P19, P20, P22	Participating in various social events and festivals	P1, P2, P4, P5, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P21, P22, P23
Motivation	P1, P2, P3, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P12, P17, P18, P21, P22	Socialization	P3, P7, P10, P11, P13, P15, P16, P17, P18, P20
Sense of belonging	P3, P5, P7, P10, P11, P14, P16, P17, P19, P20, P23	Experiencing the campus life	P1, P2, P5, P6, P8, P9, P11, P12, P13, P15, P18, P19
Psychological well-being	P5, P15, P17, P18	Taking part in activities that can be enjoyed	P1, P2, P4, P5, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P15, P16, P17, P21, P22, P23
		To have a friend group that understands them better	P2, P3, P4, P5, P8, P9, P10, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P21, P22

Psychological State Theme

It was found that the psychological state of university students who had to return to their family homes due to the pandemic was affected by this compulsory change. When the psychological expectations of the participants from university life without a pandemic were examined, it was concluded that they had expectations of gaining self-confidence, self-realization, psychological well-being, a sense of belonging, gaining the necessary motivation to specialize in their profession, and having freedom (Table 1).

In addition, it was determined that the participants who moved away from the university environment due to the pandemic had difficulties in expressing themselves in the presence of their families, experienced anxiety related to their profession because of the weakening of educational efficiency, had conflict and pressure within the family as a consequence of the restriction of their freedom, and had an excessive loss of motivation and hopelessness (Table 2).

Social State Theme

The theme of social status consists of two sub-themes: social environment and participation in various activities. It was seen that social expectations were to establish a wide social environment and circle of friends, to socialize with people who can be beneficial to them professionally, and to have a friend group that understands them better (Table 1).

Moreover, it was seen that participating in various social events and festivals, experiencing campus life, and taking part in activities that can be enjoyed, create great expectations for the participants (Table 1).

It was concluded that the social life of the participants, who moved away from the university environment due to the pandemic and returned to their family home, was adversely affected; their social life came to an end, having financial difficulties as a result of the disappearance of the opportunity to work part-time and their freedom being restricted under family pressure (Table 2).

Table 2. Students' feelings due to the pandemic

Psychological state theme		Social state theme	
Difficulties in expressing themselves in the presence of their families	P1, P2, P4, P9, P10, P13, P15, P16, P19	End of social life	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P21, P22, P23
Anxiety	P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P10, P13, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21	Having financial difficulties	P7, P16
Conflict and pressure within the family	P5, P11, P14, P17, P19, P20	Restriction of freedom	P2, P3, P5, P11, P13, P14, P17, P19, P20, P22
Excessive loss of motivation	P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P11, P12, P14, P15, P16, P18, P21, P22, P23	Negatively affected social life	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21, P22, P23
Hopelessness	P1, P2, P6, P7, P11, P12, P16		

DISCUSSION

In this study, the psychosocial state of university students who had to return to their family homes due to the Covid-19 pandemic was examined. When the results of the research were investigated, the themes of psychological state and social state related to the lives of the students during the pandemic were obtained.

It was observed that students' expectations of university life are in two groups psychological and social. A sense of belonging, gaining self-confidence, self-actualization, psychological well-being, and freedom are among the psychological expectations. It was seen that social expectations are; to establish a wide social environment and friend environment, to socialize with people who can be useful to them professionally, to live the campus life, and to participate in various social activities and festivals. As can be understood from the statements above, it is seen that university students have psychological and social expectations from university and campus life.

The concept that the participants, who moved away from the university environment due to the pandemic, expressed the most about the situation they were in was the loss of sense of belonging. It is known that the sense of belonging has social and psychological effects on university students. It also significantly affects academic success (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Studies are showing that a weak sense of belonging negatively affects mental and physical health (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016), while a strong sense of belonging is an indicator of development (Fink, 2014). For this reason, it can be thought that the sense of belonging lost during the pandemic process may cause a chain reaction and cause students to lose academically, psychologically, and socially.

It was seen another concept that was emphasized by the participants was anxiety. It was concluded that the students participating in the study experienced academic anxiety due to the decrease in educational efficiency and that their stress and anxiety increased thanks to the increase in family conflicts because of being at the family home. It is known that university students especially suffer from depression and anxiety (Lipson, Lattie, & Eisenberg, 2019). Russell and Topham (2012) also revealed that an increase in students' anxiety levels negatively affects their learning. In addition, the participants working part-time jobs in the campus environment stated that they experienced economic stress as a result of the disappearance of this opportunity. It was reported that mental health problems, like stress and anxiety, negatively affect students' academic success (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009).

It was found that the social life of the participants, who moved away from the university environment due to the pandemic and returned home, were negatively affected, their social life came to an end, and their freedom was restricted due to family pressure. When the expectations of the participants from university life are examined, it is very important for them to have a wide circle of friends and to express themselves comfortably in this social environment. However, these expectations of the participants were in vain due to the pandemic. There are studies on the effect of social factors on the academic achievement of university students (Leafgran, 1989; Pritchard, & Wilson, 2003). In addition, it is known that anxiety disorders are more likely to occur and worsen in the absence of interpersonal communication (Xiao, 2020). In this context, while the anxiety of university students who had to leave the campus environment due to the pandemic increased, their academic success was also at risk. Furthermore, it was reported that the lack of social interaction in the distance education process might have caused a lack of motivation (Güven, Yazıcı, & Doğan, 2021). Motivation is an important part of the learning

process in distance education (Khan, 2009). For this reason, contrary to their expectations, it is thought that students who came to the end of their social lives had problems such as self-confidence and disappointment.

It was seen that some of the expectations of the students participating in the research from university life are to live campus life and to participate in various social activities and festivals. On the other hand, the fact that students found themselves in an environment where campuses were closed, all activities were restricted, and they did not have the opportunity to socialize and make new friendships let all their expectations down from university life. University campuses are communities where students live, learn, work and establish a connection with each other (ACHA, 2019a). Students who lack the chance to live in this environment will inevitably have a weakening in their sense of belonging, and experience academic anxiety, and those working in part-time jobs will suffer from economic difficulties. These conditions can be expected to bring some negativities. Some previous studies on university students revealed that campus life has a direct impact on students' academic achievement (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012; Kulp, Pascale, & Grandstaff, 2021). Therefore, it can be expected that all these social changes will bring along psychological and academic negativities. This situation has become unbearable for many students participating in the research.

CONCLUSIONS

As a result, it was concluded that university students who had to return to their families' homes had a decrease in their sense of belonging; they felt anxious and stressed due to academic, professional, economic, and family reasons, and thus they were faced with problems such as uncertainty about the future. In addition, it was observed that the lack of social commitment and their motivation toward life diminished. In addition, it was found that they could not realize their goals and dreams regarding their social life, their social life came to an end, and they were disappointed with campus life and participation in various activities.

To prevent these negative situations experienced by the students, to gain decreased motivation, or minimize the losses, it may be beneficial for distance education to be carried out fluently and technically without any problems. On the other hand, comprehensive plans should be designed to respond to the negativities experienced due to the closure of campuses and the fact that students had to return to their family homes. The fact that the necessary psychosocial support can be provided by the relevant institutions to the students who request it can also positively affect the lives of university students.

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