



**UNDERSTANDING THE PERCEPTIONS AND ASSESSING THE STRESS
LEVELS OF LEARNERS DUE TO ONLINE LEARNING AS IMPOSED BY
COVID-19 STUDYING IN UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS IN ASSAM,
INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

*In a global phenomenon unseen in recent decades, SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) has scoured across entire continents and has stirred an immediate international action. This summons an understanding of the learner's mental health needs during the outbreak, along with the precautionary measures for promoting physical and psycho-social health during the pandemic. **Materials and Methods:** This cross-sectional mixed method descriptive study investigates the stress levels of 30 learners pursuing their undergraduate by administering 'A Perceived Stress Scale Questionnaire' within the age group of 18-21 years and qualitative thematic analysis of 03 learners respectively. **Results:** The study's findings show that 40% of the respondents felt that things were going in their way very often, and yet 40% of the respondents were angered because of things outside of their control very often. The in-depth interviews threw light on what problems were the respondents facing. All the learners being interviewed stated that they met academic burnout due to the pressure of the online classes and physical distancing led them to not share things with their close-knit circle, which affected their mental health.*

KEYWORDS: *Psycho-Social, Burnout, Distancing, Phenomenon*

1. INTRODUCTION

In a global phenomenon unseen in recent decades, SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) has scoured across entire continents and has stirred an immediate international action. Cases with pneumonia-like symptoms were first delineated to the WHO China Country Office from Wuhan City in late December 2019 (WHO, 2020). It was announced that the causative agent for the very same is the novel coronavirus, 2019-nCoV. The viral genome sequence was then released (Zhang et al., 2020), which closely matched those of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)-related CoV (Groot et al., 2012). Since then, the pandemic has led to unpredictability and grave global public health concerns. Research studies from previous outbreaks pillar the findings that anxiety, depression, panic attacks, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health conditions tend to increase during the time of these outbreaks (Lehmann et al., 2015). The mental health impact of the pandemic may extend beyond the general population onto other groups. This paper attempts to study the stress levels of 30 learners pursuing their undergraduate by

administering 'A Perceived Stress Scale Questionnaire' within the age group of 18-21 years and qualitative thematic analysis of 03 learners, respectively. The author states that since the literature on mental health concerning the pandemic is limited and may evolve with the pandemic's progress, this study is not exhaustive. Nonetheless, an attempt has been made to include pertinent and relevant literature in the next section.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

(Chirikov, Igor; Soria, Krista M; Horgos, Bonnie; Jones-White, Daniel, 2020)

A quantitative study called "Undergraduate and Graduate Students' Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic". was conducted in May-July, 2020, among 30725 undergraduate and 15346 graduate professionals at nine public research universities the U.S.A. Screening tools like PHQ-2 and GAD-2 were administered to the respondents. The results showed that 35% of undergraduates and 32% of graduate and professional students screened positive for major depressive disorder. In comparison, 39% of undergraduate and graduate and professional students screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder.

(Enkeleint A. Mechili, AurelaSaliaj, FationaKamberi, Charis Girvalaki, Ela Peto, Athina E. Patelarou, JorgjiaBucaj and EvridikiPatelarou, 2020)

Another cross-sectional study called "Is the mental health of young students and their family members affected during the quarantine period? Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania" was conducted at Vlora University, Albania among 863 students and 249 family members. Screening tool like Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) was used which showed that the mean PHQ-9 score was 6.220 (SD = 5.803) and 6.280 (SD = 5.857) for students and family members, respectively and the findings of the study indicate that quarantine measures have a significant impact on the levels of depression among both university students and their family members and broader population studies are necessary to safeguard these results.

(Paula Odriozolaa-Gonzalez, Alvaro Planchuelo-Gomez, Maria Jesus Irurtia and Rodrigo de Luis-Garcia, 2020)

Another cross-sectional study called "Psychological effects of the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown among students and workers of a Spanish university" was conducted among 2530 students of the University of Valladolid in Spain by administering Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21). The study results showed that moderate to too severe scores of anxiety, depression, and stress were reported by 21.34%, 34.19%, and 28.14% of the respondents, respectively, and a total of 50.43% of respondents presented moderate to the severe impact of the outbreak. Students from Arts & Humanities and Social Sciences & Law showed higher scores related to anxiety, depression, stress, and the event's impact on Engineering & Architecture students.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study Design and Study Setting:

This is a cross-sectional mixed method descriptive study conducted among undergraduate learners of Assam, India. The study was conducted for a period of 01 months from September 2020 to October 2020. The data was collected using the Perceived Stress Scale questionnaire in the form of google forms administered among 30 learners and in-depth interview guides prepared for learners.

Ethical Consideration:

1. Informed consent was taken from the participants.
2. The objective of the study was explained to the participants.
3. Anonymity and confidentiality was assured to the participants.

4. The researcher understands the sensitivity of the topic being taken up and has taken the necessary steps to maintain utmost confidentiality of the information given by the participants.

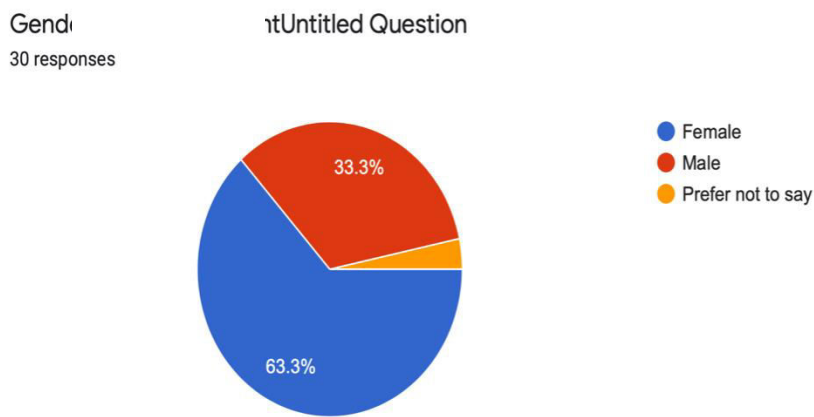
Data Analysis:

The data obtained during this study were analyzed using detailed descriptions, a direct quotation and verbatim from the participants which were converted from Assamese to English, and observation from the interviews, which provided the foundation for the analysis of the in-depth interviews and the data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed through scoring criteria as convenient for the researcher.

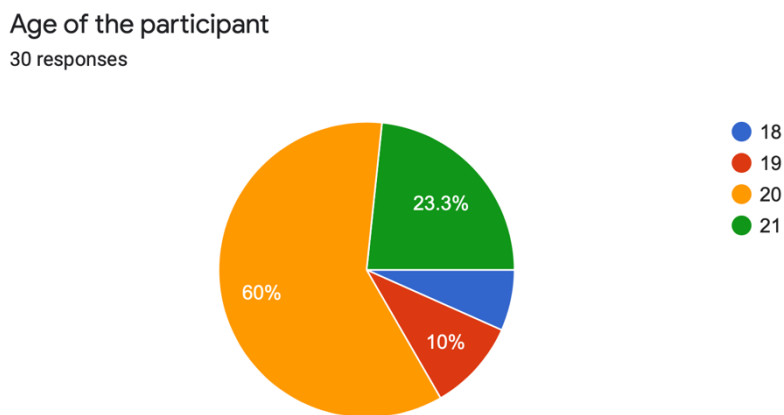
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The proposed study was carried out among 30 undergraduate learners in Kamrup Metro district of Assam, India. A total of 30 subjects were enrolled in the study.

Distribution of Gender in the study population:

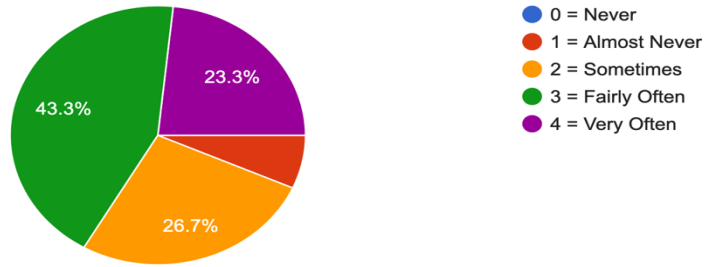


Distribution of Age in the study population:



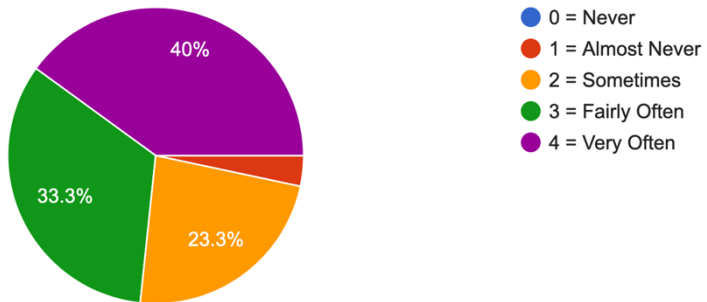
Through the research study, it was found out that in the last month, 43.3% of the respondents have been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly, as shown in the figure below.

30 responses



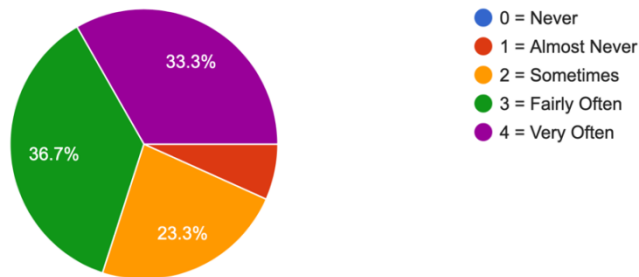
It was also found out that 40% respondents were unable to control the important things in their lives.

30 responses



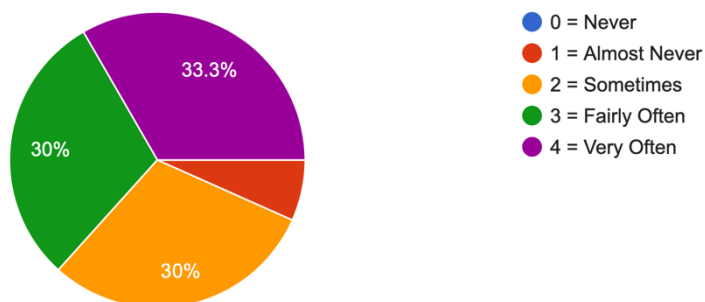
It was also found out that 36.7% respondents were nervous and felt “stressed”

30 responses



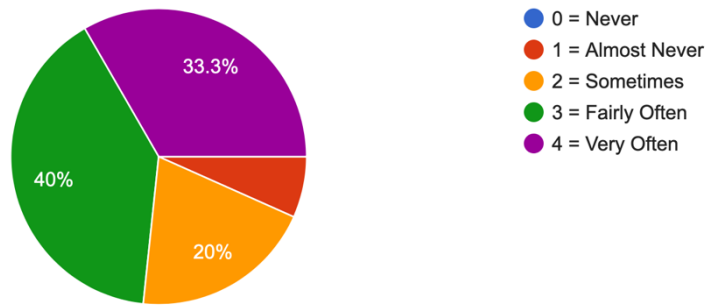
It was also found out that 33.3% of the respondents felt confident in handling their personal problems.

30 responses



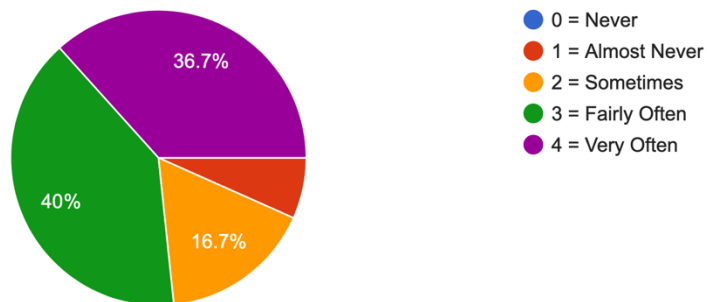
The research study also showed that 40% of the respondents felt that things were going in their own way very often.

30 responses



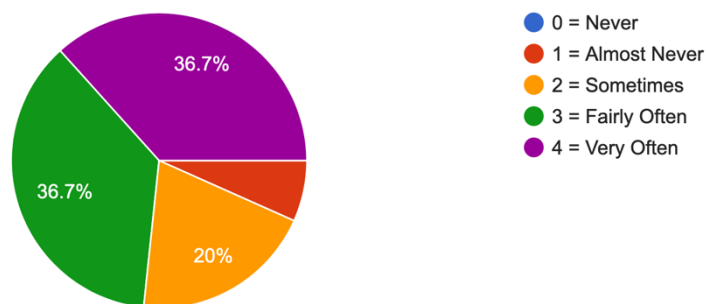
The study results also showed that 40% of the respondents were angered because of things that were outside of their control.

30 responses



The quantitative part of the research also showed that 36.7% of the respondents felt difficulties were piling up so high that they could not overcome them very often.

30 responses



In-depth interviews were conducted with 03 participants to explore their perceptions and understand their stress levels in learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The age of the participants being interviewed ranged from 19-21 years of age.

The broad themes identified during the study were learning environment, socio-cultural interactions, wellbeing, and academic burnout.

Learning Environment: COVID-19 has resulted in colleges and universities being shut all across the world for a physical class, thus resorting to an online mode of education that impacts the learners' learning environment (Li and Lalani, 2020). As a result, the education system has changed drastically with a remarkable rise in e-learning methods, whereby teaching is undertaken remotely on digital platforms.

As interviewed by the research, a youngster stated that *"I am finding it quite difficult to adjust to this new learning environment. We are constantly staring into the digital screen for more than 15 hours consecutively, which really impacts my health and is very stressful"* (Respondent_02_Undergrad_Student)

Another participant stated that *"This is the new form of education where everything is online. A few months back, it wasn't like this. I am finding it difficult to cope"* (Respondent_03_Undergrad_Student)

Socio-cultural Interactions: Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has been presupposed mainly on physical distancing, though this has, unfortunately, been discursively referred to in formal and informal discourse as social distancing, and there is a vast difference between the two concepts, with physical distancing not necessarily precluding social connectedness, whereas social distancing unavoidably presumes disconnectedness (UNESCO, 2020)

Due to physical distancing, there has been a stop to many socio-cultural interactions, thus leaving people in isolation.

One of the respondents being interviewed stated, *"I haven't met my friends and relatives for a really long time now. My parents don't allow me to go out and hence, I have no one to share things with. Most of the time, I feel isolated at home"* (Respondent_01_Undergrad_Student)

Another youngster stated that *"I call my friends....But calling is not the same as meeting and interacting in person."* (Respondent_02_Undergrad_Student)

Overall Wellbeing: An article by (Roy et al., 2020) reported a higher proportion of participants in a survey from across India, dwelling on thoughts related to COVID-19 and a heightened perception of the need for mental health support to tide over the present times. In the Indian context, the large population size with relatively high density poses a significant threat of decline in the population's overall wellbeing. With the little impetus given to mental health thus far, challenges ahead are to be expected.

One of the youngsters being interviewed stated, *"I feel like my mental health is in shambles now. I get anxious all the time.....I feel scared that if I go out of home, then I might get COVID-19. But if I stay inside, then my family will drive me insane"* (Respondent_01_Undergrad_Student)

Academic Burnout: Academic burnout can be characterized as an adverse emotional, physical, and mental reaction to extended study periods that result in exhaustion, frustration, and lack of motivation (Lin and Huang, 2014).

One of the respondents being interviewed stated that *"There is a lot of pressure that I have been feeling due to the online classes. Physical classes are much better than online classes. Staring into the screen really exhausts you and your potentials"* (Respondent_03_Undergrad_Student)

CONCLUSION:

This research study explored undergraduate learners' stress levels during the pandemic and how it has impacted their lives. The research study's findings showed that 40% of the respondents felt that things were going in their way very often, and yet 40% of the respondents were angered because of things that were outside of their control very often. The in-depth interviews threw light on what problems were the respondents facing. All the learners being interviewed stated that they met academic burnout due to the pressure of the online classes and physical distancing led them to not share things with their close-knit circle, which affected their mental health.

RECOMMENDATION:

Various strategies like online counseling and psychological interventions can empower individuals to enhance their quality of life as it needs the hour. An online helpdesk for mental health counseling should also be introduced, which is accessible to all. To maintain good mental health

among learners, primary caregivers play an integral role while keeping communication open to help the learners navigate their fears and concerns.

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