RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Can everyone see me?": Exploring online distance learning and its challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

When studying possible impacts and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, changes and challenges in students' learning activities as a result of the temporary school closures and the shift to online distance learning are likely to be observed. One of the more prominent changes is the move from face-to-face (FtF) learning to online distance learning with the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC). In the Philippines, students' current learning conditions rely on digital technologies that advance education through virtual learning environments and platforms. This paper explores the lived experiences of students using CMC as part of their online distance learning. The study also aims to analyze the influence of CMC, as part of the pedagogical shifts during the pandemic, on students' perspectives on learning and classroom interaction. On this basis, the paper reflects on how the shift to online education has affected students' psychosocial characteristics and well-being.

For this study, in-depth interviews were conducted among Filipino senior high school students (n=27) and college students (n=20). Drawing from the social information processing theory (SIPT), findings revealed that the student's use of CMC has resulted in: technology serving as an alternative to FtF interactions, academic (de)socialization, and impersonalized learning environments. With academic learning relying solely on digital technologies during the pandemic, students experienced an increasing digital divide in terms of internet connectivity. Moreover, students felt that learning activities in their online classes lacked social orientation and had limited practical skills development. As a result, the learning of students has become impersonalized, which has led to emotional and mental health disturbances. As a conclusion, the study suggests reevaluating and reflecting on the existing struggles of students to better implement CMC as a potential instructional delivery during an on-going pandemic.

Keywords: *online learning; computer-mediated communication; distance learning; social information processing; COVID-19 pandemic*

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Introduction

Across the globe, millions of lives have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a worldwide public health emergency. In March 2020, state-mandated lockdowns were implemented as a preventive measure against the spread of the virus. With a global health pandemic, many operations of various sectors, including health and business sectors, have been disrupted and confronted with unprecedented challenges, creating "new normalities" across various fields (Dimopoulos et. al, 2021; Pastor, 2020). In an attempt to mitigate the spread of the virus, national governments ordered universities and institutions to close indefinitely, leaving many students and teachers in a state of confusion and uncertainty. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the pandemic has resulted in school closures in more than 200 countries, affecting over 90% of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020a). These school closures have affected more than 1.2 billion students worldwide, with more than 28 million students in the Philippines alone (UNESCO, 2020b). The COVID-19 pandemic has forced nations and their governments to create feasible and effective solutions for education to still continue amidst the abrupt interruption. As a response, online educational environments, through the use of digital technologies and online learning platforms, were created for teachers to continue their pedagogic work and for students to learn safely in their homes (Basuony et al., 2020; Crawford et al., 2020, Tria, 2020).

Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

Emerging as a global norm for pedagogy, distance education, remote learning, and online instruction have taken a renewed salience to education as "pandemic pedagogies" (Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020). Educational institutions modified their pedagogic workflow strategies and adopted new technologies, which prompted a quick transition from traditional face-to-face (FtF) synchronous learning to online modalities such as video conferencing (via Microsoft Teams or Zoom) and online learning platforms (e.g., Google Classrooms). With the significant increase in online learning since the start of the pandemic (Li & Lalani, 2020), various Learning Management Systems (LMS), such as Canvas, Moodle, and Blackboard, are now being utilized as an important aspect of online education. Basically, an LMS is a software application that is used to administer and deliver educational courses, learning materials, and training programs (Ellis, 2009). Online education allows students to adapt their routine home schedules to advance education through the maximization of productivity and resources (Xie et. al., 2020). Many institutions have also become more interested in integrating both

synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods to provide students with better opportunities for learning while keeping safe at home (Mukhtar et al., 2020).

In adopting these "pandemic pedagogies" that make use of an online learning environment, the distance between classroom individuals (e.g., teacher to students, students to other students) is bridged by direct interaction that is mediated by digital learning platforms (Inglis et al., 2002). The development of information and communication technology (ICT) and electronic media has enabled educational sectors to create online learning communities that rely on technology and various virtual activities (Marani et al., 2020). With students and teachers interacting without being bounded by space and time, the patterns of computer-mediated communication (CMC) have changed classroom interaction from FtF participations to meetings in digital space. In education, CMC is defined as the use of networked telecommunications systems to facilitate message transmission where individuals can create, exchange, and receive information (December, 1996). CMC is designed to capacitate both synchronous and asynchronous communication through multi-pathed networks (Marani et al., 2020) without the limitations of FtF communications such as dependence on time and place, and communication structures and richness (Harasim, 1990). Research on CMC has focused on collaborative learning (Li, 2002; Prinsen et al., 2007), group decision making (Baltes et al., 2002; Li, 2007), and students' participation (Chen et al., 2012; Thompson & Savenye, 2007).

However, these new strategies and their associated technologies were not given enough reflective time among institutions prior to integration in their existing setup (Carroll & Conboy, 2020). It was perhaps Bao's (2020) case study that first described this online teaching "migration" during the COVID-19 outbreak. The study concluded with five principles of high-impact teaching practice using online learning: (a) appropriate relevance of content; (b) effective delivery of instruction; (c) sufficient support for the faculty; (d) improvement towards high-quality student participation; and (e) viable contingency plan. At this point, scholars have tried to describe and understand the different perspectives of students and faculty members on these new educational strategies during the pandemic using empirical studies, especially in various Asian contexts like Indonesia (Abdillah et al., 2021), Georgia (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020), Brunei (Qazi et al. 2020), Iraq (Badur et al., 2021) and India (Mishra et al., 2020). Despite initiatives to understand and adopt these "pandemic pedagogies," a glaring issue soon emerged among the literature across nations: the majority of students disadvantaged by their socio-contextual environment are being left behind,

which has magnified existing educational inequalities (e.g., Dimopoulos et al., 2021; Frohn, 2021; Stein, 2020; Sweeney, 2020).

Recent scholarship on online learning during the pandemic argues that the current situation in education has exacerbated various disparities among students (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Doyle, 2020). The non-availability of technologies and gadgets, for example, has been an educational constraint for the majority of students participating in online learning (Dogar et al., 2020). Aside from the lack of gadgets, inadequate facilities such as the internet were found to be major factors that limit online engagement and reduce educational opportunities for disadvantaged students (Onyema et al., 2020; Pastor, 2020). Geographical location can also hinder the learning process; most students are from rural areas where there is limited adequate infrastructure that enables functional online learning (Dubey & Pandey, 2020).

Apart from surviving during a pandemic, the challenges and constraints that students face during online learning can lead to additional stress that may affect their physical and mental well-being (Chakraborty et al., 2020). These educational constraints are even heightened among students with physical disabilities as they experience social exclusions online and limited access to assistive technologies (Dianito et al., 2021).

In adopting online education, students are not the only ones who experience difficulties but also their teachers. Similar to students, teachers are also confronted with the unavailability of gadgets and a stable internet connection (Dogar et al., 2020; Onyema et al., 2020). Teachers are also not properly equipped with technical skills and teaching styles that can be effectively incorporated to the online environment (Coman et al., 2020; Moralista & Oducado, 2020). Extrapolating these findings, the reconstruction of school life entailed by the virtual-restricted interaction of students will continually increase the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged students (Dimopoulos et al., 2021).

Filipino students during the COVID-19 pandemic

With the state-mandated community quarantine and lockdowns, students and teachers are forced to use CMC to adapt to online learning instruction. In response to this current situation, the Department of Education (DepEd) implemented the Learning Continuity Plan (LCP), which is a strategic plan designed to continue the conduct of classes during the pandemic while following health protocols for the protection of students, teachers, and school personnel (Ancheta & Ancheta, 2020). In the higher education sector, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) gave universities academic freedom to implement available distance learning,

e-learning, and alternative modes for learning (CHED, 2020). However, these reforms in instructional delivery only exposed worsening educational inequalities in the Philippines created by its neoliberal systemic governance (Toquero et al., 2021). This neoliberalism in education offers digital learning solutions that are not grounded in developing academic instruction, but rather on making business profits and commercialization of education (Teräs et. al, 2020).

Doing online classes, the majority of Filipino students are found to have major internet connectivity problems in their areas that inhibit online synchronous mode of delivery (Pastor, 2020). Because of poor connections, most Filipino students have a negative perception of online learning and are unwilling to participate in online classes (Baloran, 2020). Moreover, students are challenged in creating their own conducive learning environment at home because of limited learning spaces and inherent distractions at home (Barrot et al., 2021). Among nursing students, it was revealed that online learning has been stressful and that it has already negatively affected their academic performance and level of course satisfaction (Oducado & Estoque, 2021). Aside from stress, Filipino students are also experiencing anxiety from having to worry about themselves and the well-being of their families (Baloran, 2020). Based on the presented findings, similarities are apparent among the worldwide struggles and challenges of students with the unprecedented shift of classrooms to an online set-up. Even with the limited literature available on Filipino students' experiences on online learning, it can already be inferred that these challenges that students confront contribute to the existing inequalities in the Philippine education system.

Statement of the Problem

The study explored the different experiences of Filipino students in doing online distance learning. Specifically, it sought to understand the changes in the nature of social interaction and classroom participation of students in a computer-mediated learning environment. The study also analyzed the potential impact of CMC on students' perspectives of their own learning and classroom socialization. Further, the study aimed to identify various struggles and challenges experienced by these students in the senior high school and tertiary levels. Lastly, the findings hoped to expose the current situation of students during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the shift to online education provides, or restricts, learning predicated in these educational reforms.

Theoretical Framework

With learning mediated through communication, specifically in CMC, the social information processing theory (SIPT) was employed in the current study as the appropriate theory in analyzing the process of CMC use in online distance learning. As a theory subject "to continued modification, extension, and refinement" (Walther, 2008, p. 426), the study represents a qualitative and empirical verification of a theory which is characteristically framed in positivist methodologies. The study also contributes to the scholarly shift of the theory's use in various qualitative research contexts (Dwyer, 2007; Lindqvist, 2010).

As a background, Joseph Walther (1992) first introduced this theory to describe and explain the nature of online communication for its potential for relationship-building. Walther described social information processing as "the (individual) cognitive processing of socially revelatory information (and subsequent communication based on that information), rather than the social (conjoint) processing of information (about a medium)" (p. 68). The theory attempts to address the following objectives: (a) to reflect an inherent but relatively vague set of paradigmatic assumptions about the relationship of message cues (both verbal and nonverbal) to the interpretation of affective expression of verbal behavior from the absence of physical behavior; (b) to be able to account both findings of laboratory studies and anecdotal accounts of online communication by identifying specific predictors that have the potential to facilitate the medium's effect on communication; and (c) to articulate new theoretical perspectives that can generate testable hypotheses and different views of CMC (Walther et al., 2015).

Drawing from this perspective, it should be understood that the theory assumes that there are certain *relational motivators* (e.g., affiliation motive) that prompt individuals to communicate by *decoding* text-based cues (that allow people to make attributions about the communicator's background and the intent of communication) and deriving *psychological-level knowledge* (i.e., interpersonal epistemology) that can result to *relational changes* (i.e., if communicators are less acquainted, messages will have low relational dominance and be task-oriented) and *encode* (e.g., nonverbal or verbal, linguistic, and textual manipulations) messages in CMC (Walther, 1992). In the context of the study, students' participation in online education is driven by their desire for learning and affiliation to their institutions, including their peers and teachers. The nature of online learning being computer-mediated, information for academic socialization is exchanged through verbal and nonverbal message channels i.e., online learning platforms and virtual classrooms. This process, then, becomes an explanatory grounding for how CMC has changed the inherent traits of students' classroom

interaction as it shifted from FtF to online platforms. The theory offers the interpretation and analysis of the complex situation of pandemic-related educational reforms, focusing on the technological mediations of students' learning and interactions. Moreover, it provides a critical attention to the emerging relational changes and challenges of students towards academic socialization through the use of CMC.

Research Methods

Using a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), the current paper is an exploratory study of students' experiences with their online learning and the challenges they faced. In total, forty-seven (47) students in Cavite and the National Capital Region were interviewed. The sample consisted of senior high school students (n=27) and undergraduate students (n=20) experiencing online distance learning in their respective schools. Senior high school (SHS) students were mostly from Academic tracks: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), Accountancy and Business Management (ABM), and Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS). Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) currently enrolled in any Philippine institution that implements online distance learning; (b) uses online learning platforms in their courses; and (c) willing to participate in any follow-up interviews. Varying socio-economic backgrounds were also considered in the selection process of the participants to provide a broader perspective on their current situations.

Prior to the interviews, the researcher sent an informed consent form and the study's rationale to each student's email to ensure ethical considerations. The researcher then conducted semi-structured interviews which were organized according to the research questions while allowing probing and unstructured exploration (Bryman, 2015). Because of the national lockdowns, the interviews were conducted online. To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were used in the results. The researcher transcribed, translated, and categorized all the transcripts through qualitative data analysis (Strauss, 1987), drawing from the various assumptions of SIPT regarding CMC (Walther, 1992; 1996; 2008). After inductively encoding and identifying themes grounded in the framework, these themes were discussed with two external validators.

Results

Based on the interview process and data analysis, student's use of CMC has resulted in: 1) technology as an alternative to FtF interaction; 2) academic (de)socialization; and 3) impersonalized learning environment. These themes represent how the use of CMC changed the classroom interactions

of students in their online distance learning and the major challenges that they experienced in this kind of interactions, especially during an on-going pandemic. Also, the themes manifest how online distance learning has changed the nature of students' learning and learning environment situated in an online classroom setup.

Technology as alternative to face-to-face interactions

Because of the on-going pandemic and national lockdowns, educational institutions have adopted online distance learning where digital technologies and online learning platforms served as alternatives to FtF classroom interactions. With the implementation of CMC, technology has become a deterrent factor to learning and academic participation among students. In the interviews, many participants pointed out that almost all of their courses taken for that the academic year 2020-2021 were delivered online. They mentioned that their respective schools would have both synchronous and asynchronous online sessions for each of their subjects. The senior high school, for example, allots two hours for online synchronous sessions and one asynchronous session for each subject per week. During the synchronous sessions, students were able to interact with their classmates and teachers. They were encouraged to participate in various online activities prepared by their subject teachers.

Richard, a college student, recalled how virtual activities through apps imitated the physical interactions in a FtF classroom setup.

> I have experienced games and debates. The games were either to be done individually or in a group quiz format while the debates practiced us citing sources to further support our stand. The pandemic has altered it where apps have these features to imitate physical means of interaction, such as raising hand or reacting as well.

Eva, another college student, mentioned how instructions and assessments were implemented online.

> Classroom activities consisting of recitation, quizzes, debate, and group works were done. During the pandemic, online discussions were implemented as well as timed online assessments or essays.

Erika, a SHS STEM student, described how they were able to use online learning platforms to share their insights during her class's research defenses.

> Using online platforms as our virtual classroom, we are allowed to give our insights on each other's topics and think of ways to improve what we have come up to [sic].

In a similar research-related activity, Paul, a college student, stated how online learning has changed the way he collaborates and talks to his peers regarding an assignment.

> "In these trying times, we are not allowed to meet in person or to be in contact with each other. Meetings have been made online to discuss the development and understanding we have researched as we made our paper, especially in my part that I am working in an organization."

With the restrictions on FtF interactions, students' meetings with each other were done online. Because of the pandemic, students were obligated to use online platforms and social networking sites (SNS) to communicate and reach each other whenever they would accomplish tasks in their subjects.

With technologies serving as an alternative to FtF interactions, a major challenge among the participants was the quality of internet connectivity. Blair, a SHS STEM student, recalled how her classmates were having difficulties participating in online discussions and recitations because of intermittent connectivity. She shared how her teachers were able to compensate for such issues through the use of various learning apps, like Kahoot.

> Recitation in...virtual classroom set-up became a struggle for every one of us due to internet connectivity issues. However, some teachers have their own way of recitation through a website or application that enables us to answer certain questions regarding the topic that has been discussed. To give an example, Kahoot is a great app for this type of activity.

This sentiment on internet connectivity issue was seconded by Dana, a SHS HUMSS student from the same university.

> Today, in this online learning situation, it became difficult for us to communicate since some of my classmates don't have stable internet connection.

As revealed in the literature, internet connectivity seems to be a major problem, not just with senior high school students but also college students.

Irma, a college student, shared how issues on the internet connection made it more difficult for her to adjust to her online classes.

> The others [her classmates] would lose internet connection or there would be no signal so we had difficulty adjusting, and we experienced many changes in the new normal online class study.

The struggles of students in the online classes were best articulated by Carla, an education student, who pointed out the increasing digital divide among students.

> Now that we had a shift from classroom-based discussion to online classes, there was a dramatic change in learning especially because of the digital divide that everyone is experiencing.

Academic (de)socialization

Related to technology issues is another issue among students in the limited, or even the loss, of opportunities for effective collaborative learning with peers and adults outside their familial environment. Because of the pandemic, students have been restricted to interact and collaborate with each other through the use of CMC. Drawing from the assumptions of SIPT, the exchange of information among individuals operates differently between CMC and FtF communication: in CMC the language channel carries fewer messages than FtF utterances, which makes it more difficult for the former's users to achieve relational definition equivalent to interaction in the latter (Walther et al., 2015). As revealed in the interviews, some of the students' assignments required collaborative work among peers, like doing group research or group presentations. Students were quick to point out how difficult collaborative tasks using CMC were when some of their classmates did not have the luxury of a stable internet connection. This was evident in Frances', a SHS ABM student, statement:

> In these trying times, it would be hard for us to communicate with one another in making our research paper because some of us have weak Wi-Fi connection.

The nature of CMC coupled with internet connectivity issues has led to the academic (de)socialization of learning activities in online distance learning, where social interactions and participation were constantly constrained and restricted.

Aside from not having to interact with peers FtF, the pandemic has also limited the students' opportunities to experience various practical activities. For instance, students were not able to experience laboratory activities because of the school closures and the shift of classroom activities online. Frank, a SHS STEM student, said that he was not able to experience doing experimental research inside of a science laboratory because of the pandemic. He mentioned that their class discussions and research works are limited only to technologies that students had at home.

> The modifications that I have observed during this pandemic is that ideas are often limited to the technology side of the STEM [which is present at home], as laboratories and street methods of conducting research are unavailable.

This situation can be problematic for the majority of students because not everyone has readily available technologies and laboratory equipment that can be used for experimental research at home.

Another aspect of the shift to distance learning that should be taken in consideration is how half of the students chose to have modular distance learning because of the lack of technologies. Erwin, a SHS HUMSS student, stated that the shift to online classrooms felt underwhelming compared to the traditional classroom learning because of the former's lack of physical interactions of students with each other. He also pointed out how it was even more difficult for students who were part of the modular learning course because these students did not have anyone else to interact with besides their own immediate families at home.

> The fact that this virtual classroom feels lacking compared to face-to-face classes in person, especially for those students who took the modular course. The social aspect that should be present in a classroom is now gone.

The fact that almost half of Filipino learners are now using modular distance learning is usually overlooked by the literature done during the pandemic. There are only a handful of studies that looked into the lived experiences of these students who were part of the country's modular distance learning (Anzaldo, 2021; Santillan & Labaria, 2021).

As an immediate response to these issues, learning activities have been modified to favor individual tasks. Students reported that there were more individual course requirements and less group activities during their online classes than their FtF classroom setup. Students observed that their classroom activities pre-pandemic were more enjoyable and more productive

as they performed and interacted more with collaborative tasks. Reese, a SHS STEM student, shared how the learning activities during FtF interactions enabled students to interact freely and help each other, unlike the majority of the activities in her online classes.

> Back then in grade 11, we used to do the activities as a group. We would help each other to finish the work. Also, the activities were partnered with other subjects. That means that we don't have to do as much. However, during this pandemic, we were tasked with more activities. Also, we are expected to pass individually.

This observation was seconded by Hannah, a SHS ABM student, who thought that practical activities were limited during her online classes as most of her requirements were only focused on their abilities to answer tests and quizzes. She compared her past classroom experience to her current learning situation thus:

> We used to have both practical and written activities. We get to interact with different people, and we also get to work in groups hand in hand. But now, due to the pandemic, what we can only do is download the file template, answer it, then submit it. The only practical thing we get to do is record ourselves dancing in TikTok for PE class.

Aside from the lack of practical activities during online classes, speaking activities that allow students to practice their language skills and critical thinking skills were also limited. May, an undergraduate student, shared that

> [n]ow that we are amidst the pandemic and can't interact with each other face to face, public speaking activities were lessened and many subjects are giving out tasks to be done using various online platforms.

Because of the immediate transition of schools to online platforms, learning activities lacked sufficient reflections and evaluation by teachers and administrators to take into account the various needs and situations of students during the pandemic. Moreover, the lack of reflective practice in the selection process of online activities might have been a result of different factors such as limited teacher preparations, lack of school diagnostic and

needs analysis of students, and lack of educational support from the national government.

Impersonalized learning environment

With the lack of nonverbal cues and reduced interactivity in online asynchronous sessions, CMC is considered inherently impersonal due to its lack of social presence that usually conveys personal and emotional information as in FtF interactions (Walther, 1996). Consequently, learning through CMC has become less socially oriented and less personal compared to FtF classroom interactions. As a result, classroom activities, and learning in general, have become more task-oriented rather than student-oriented. These observations on the use of CMC are reflected in how impersonalized students felt their learning had become. Frances said that she felt like she was just passing requirements without learning in this "new normal" setup.

> The new normal setup stressed my whole well-being. I felt like I was just passing requirements and forgot about learning. Twenty-four hours a day is not enough to fulfill all my responsibilities. I already set aside self/me time because I have another commitment that is scheduled at night. That is why in my free time, I just want to sit at my study table and try to understand all the lessons that I already forgot. I still try to enlighten myself by thinking that all of this would be worth it and it will improve my time and stress management.

The impersonalized and task-oriented learning of online education had created additional struggles for students that resulted in Filipino students suffering from anxieties and mental health issues (Baloran, 2020; Oducado & Estoque, 2021). Students trying to adapt to the "new normalities" of online education while dealing with the on-going pandemic are more prone to experience anxieties and academic burn-out. Paul shared:

> It was mentally draining and physically exhausting. It causes me a lot of anxiety and overthinking if I am doing enough. Especially when you experience something horrible and you don't deserve it, I feel bad for myself but also for the other students who experienced the same situation like I do.

This sentiment is shared by Blair who mentioned that the additional pressure took such a toll on her mental health that she became forgetful and had difficulty focusing on her tasks.

> I feel pressured sometimes and it feels tiring even though I don't go out of the house. Sometimes, I tend to forget about myself and just focus on the things that I should do instead of the things that I want to do.

Aside from being forgetful and having difficulty focusing, students also experienced having mental breakdowns and sleep deprivation. May shared that

> [t]he stress and pressure that we experience with all the school work is truly overwhelming. I get sleep deprived and experience mental breakdown sometimes when I have a hard time with a task and can't ask anyone for help.

May noted how the lack of social interaction with her friends and peers made it more difficult for her to vent her problems and ask for help. These struggles and problems of students only resulted in students underperforming academically and putting more pressure on themselves to do better. Dana recounted:

> There were a lot of breakdowns and what ifs. A lot of times, when I do not feel satisfied with my work, I tend to redo it. It's hard to be 'the best' in every subject at the same time.

In the context of the pandemic, students' dissatisfaction with the use of CMC in distance learning was also reflected in other literature (Marani et al., 2020)

The impersonality of learning via CMC is also reflected in the students' lack of conducive and personal learning space at home. Because learning is taking place at home, students are struggling to find a balance between their daily home routines and academic work. Clarisse, an undergraduate student, shared her observations about her online classes:

> In this pandemic, gatherings are not allowed and that makes it more difficult to have meetings and brainstorming because not everyone is privileged to have a stable network. There's the struggle that one member's network is not stable or he can't focus because it's noisy in their home or background. One more thing is when one group mate can't do the task because he doesn't have the time to do it since he has a lot of chores in their home and he's the only one who can do them. Not like face-to-face where we can focus

> on what we have to do and be productive because we are all together, it is easier to suggest opinions.

This is similar to Barrot et al.'s (2021) findings that college students find it difficult to have a proper learning environment at home, especially since not everyone is privileged to have a separate room for learning and academic work. With all the problems and challenges students face in their online classes while dealing with the inevitable fear of the pandemic, many students are left wondering whether there will be fruition in their continuous struggle for academic standing. Nadine, a SHS HUMSS student, said

> [t]here are times when it could really be stressful and hard to handle. There are times where I find myself asking 'am I really learning or just simply accomplishing these tasks.'

Discussion

The shared experience of students reveal the many learning conditions and challenges in the use of CMC in their online distance learning. Participants mentioned how online classes via CMC imitated the way they interacted in FtF. With FtF restricted, students' interactions in their classrooms have been mediated through technologies and online learning platforms. However, based on the recorded accounts, students generally preferred FtF interaction over CMC for various reasons. This is similar to the findings of studies that looked into students' perceptions of the use of CMC compared to FtF discussions (An & Frick, 2006; Favotto et al., 2017; Marani et al., 2020). Students reported that FtF interactions and discussions were more enjoyable and substantial than those in CMC where learning activities felt limited and favored individual tasks. This suggests that the potential benefits of CMC are not being utilized well in online distance learning in the country.

The preference for FtF interaction can be attributed to the problems with internet connectivity encountered by a majority of the students (Onyema et al., 2020; Pastor, 2020). This is a reflection of the existing digital divide among students that is only magnified by the implementation of online education. Fundamentally, digital divide pertains to the uneven and unequal distribution of internet access and cellular networks between areas and countries (Hung & Wati, 2020). The United Nations (UN, 2020) reported the startling digital gap between the high-, middle-, and low-income countries and how it has affected students' access to digital platforms, resources, and services. Eventually, the pandemic may not only increase the digital divide between developed and developing countries but also

exacerbate the digital inequalities between advantaged and disadvantaged individuals (Beaunoyer et al., 2020; Frohn, 2021). These digital disparities during the pandemic have led to scholarly discussions on quality of access, effective use of digital technologies, and people's purpose of use (Robinson et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2020).

As digital technologies enable individuals to communicate regardless of physical distance by creating similar virtual space (Monge & Contractor, 2003), the use of CMC allows the expansion of a person's social network for continuous interactions that may not occur FtF (Hlebec et al., 2006; Lin et al., 2007). But despite the benefits of CMC, it seemed that the implementation of online education might not have maximized its potential for student participation. The use of CMC was described by the participants as restricting and adversely affecting their communication with others, and consequently, limiting their learning as well. The limitations on the use of CMC might have been the result of the increasing digital divide among students of the country. Participants mentioned that distance learning using CMC has prompted more individual assignments and a decrease of quality outcomes, especially caused by lack of practical activities, and limited opportunities for social interactions between students and teachers. Compared with the curriculum of SHS students, the lack of practical activities that develop specialized skills hindered the college students' preparation and training for their professional careers. Many college students were quick to mention how the shift to online distance learning restricted learning opportunities that only occur in specialized classroom set-ups, like laboratory classes and hands-on trainings. Moreover, the distance in online learning has been a huge divide in the lecture process where the absence of interactions between teachers and students in the same physical space has changed students' perceptions of course materials and classroom interactions (Elareshi et al., 2020; Fulford, & Zhang, 1993; Marani et al., 2020).

Another finding that emerged from the interviews was the potential for negative emotional and mental health disturbances when engaging in CMC. Negative emotions such as stress, anger, and frustrations that, according to the students, resulted from CMC use were also mentioned in previous studies linking CMC with poor mental health outcomes (Chen & Lee, 2013; Riedl et al., 2013; Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015). Participants also experienced mental health issues such as depression and feelings of anxiousness that have resulted in dissatisfaction with schooling and poor academic performance. Similar mental health issues were noted in other studies that looked into students' learning conditions during the pandemic (Baloran, 2020; Chakraborty et al., 2020; Oducado & Estoque, 2021). These negative emotional and mental health issues may be the result

of CMC's impersonalized and *desocialized* learning environment. Because of restrictions on FtF, students are oftentimes forced to use CMC as a method of communication to contact their peers. The use of CMC among groups of young people has become a social norm (Favotto et al., 2017). In the interviews, participants also spoke of how multiple distractions at home (e.g., noises or household chores) have negatively affected their way of learning. Because reliable alternatives to students' homes, such as school facilities and libraries, were closed, the lack of a conducive learning space at home can result in psychosocial challenges and medical worries (Barrot et al., 2021; Frohn, 2021).

Two overarching concepts identified when understanding students' perspectives of CMC use in their online distance learning are: (1) the multidimensional influence of digital divide in education during the pandemic, and (2) the duality of positive and negative potential for the use of CMC in education. Distance learning using CMC has resulted in various issues such as overdependence on technology and limited internet networks (Marani et al, 2020). Thus, the widening digital gap between privileged and disadvantaged students has only made the idea of inclusivity in education an abstract phenomenon, not an experienced phenomenon among students (Alvarez, 2021). Participants expressed experiencing the influence of a digital divide that made relational development among peers and teachers in their online classes more difficult. In addition, the dual impact of both positive and negative elements of CMC is in line with the literature not showing any consensus in terms of CMC use being harmful or beneficial to learning (Favotto et al., 2017). Conflicting educational beliefs around the influences of CMC present a challenge to communication researchers and educational policy makers targeting students' behavioral changes in the use of CMC over traditional FtF classroom interaction. However, it is still important to maximize the advantages of CMC during the pandemic for curriculum development and instructional delivery. Recognizing these assumptions allows space for balance and control of the potential positive influences of CMC on students' learning.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Distance learning has been implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in various Philippine schools and universities to mitigate the spread of the virus. The implementation of distance learning has relied on the use of CMC as a channel to advance education while keeping teachers and students safe in their homes. With CMC as one of the main bases for the distance learning process, different online platforms have been used to assist learning during the pandemic. From the discussion, it can be concluded that

the effectiveness of instructional delivery is influenced by the students and teachers' use of technologies. One glaring issue found is the educational inequalities and digital divide among students, which have been magnified by the implementation of online distance learning. Findings revealed that digital disparities in this type of set-up restricted students without stable internet connectivity from having equal opportunities to learning. Unlike in previous literature that showed active student participation in CMC environments (Li, 2002; Prinsen et al., 2007), current findings revealed that students in this environment found classroom activities lacking in social orientation, making learning impersonal and stagnant. The impersonality of learning has resulted in various emotional, mental, and social health issues among those students. Therefore, to maximize the potential of CMC in distance learning, sufficient educational and technological support should be provided to mitigate these inequalities. Moreover, institutions, together with educational agencies, should be able to recognize the advantages of creating "hybrid learning environments" (see Graham & Allen, 2005) that utilize both CMC and FtF interactions in the teaching-learning process.

With a limited sample, the study can only be considered as explorative, especially since there have been a paucity of studies that investigated the use of CMC in the distance learning of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the results promise to be transferable in the sense that students sharing their experiences and observations have an abstract importance to how the country can improve not only instructional delivery during a pandemic but also the education sector's view of digital technologies through the lens of their own students. It is clear in the interviews that students are willing to learn and participate in school as long as they are given sufficient educational support and a conducive learning environment. Providing technological resources to students can have a substantial impact on mitigating educational and digital inequalities, and allowing disadvantaged students to have a similar and thus fair starting point as other students.the paper's findings suggest a consideration of students' living and learning situations, leading to a reevaluation and detailed reflection on the implementation of online learning. This can help to identify students' needs and compensate for any capital deficits among them. For further research, critical attention can be paid to experiences gained during the pandemic to know how to better develop instructional materials and delivery in a world of unprecedented changes, towards the eventual improving and probably rethinking of classroom and school practices.

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