NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ONLINE LEARNING: A STUDY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN GHANA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Kalyan Kumar Sahoo, Medicaps University, Indore
Sheetal Jaldhari, Medicaps University, Indore
Ruchi Kushwah, Medicaps University, Indore
Swadhin Kumar Rout, Medicaps University
Jonathan Odame, University of Ghana, Ghana

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional classroom learning across the globe, forcing many educational institutions to shift to online learning. This study examines the experiences of university students in Ghana as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of online learning during the pandemic. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected through in-depth interviews with 20 university students from different disciplines and analyzed thematically. The findings highlight common challenges faced by participants, such as limited access to resources, unreliable internet, and inadequate institutional support. However, participants also identified opportunities and benefits of online learning, including increased flexibility and access to diverse learning resources. Socio-economic status and institutional support were identified as important factors influencing participants' experiences. The study underscores the need for policy and practice to address the challenges faced by students in online learning, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and harness the opportunities of online learning.

Keywords: Challenges and Opportunities of Online Learning, University Students Experiences, Ghana, COVID-19 Pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, the COVID-19 epidemic has caused disruptions to traditional classroom instruction, compelling numerous educational institutions to switch to online learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the considerable difficulties currently confronting Ghana's educational system (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020). The Ghanaian government closed schools and universities in March 2020, and students were required to continue their studies through online platforms (Osei-Kofi et al., 2020). However, online learning is not a new concept in Ghana, and the country has been exploring the use of technology in education for over a decade.

The government of Ghana launched the e-Transform project in 2010, aimed at harnessing the potential of information and communication technology (ICT) to improve the country's development, including education (Agyei et al., 2020). The project included initiatives such as the Ghana Online Learning Platform (GOLP) and the establishment of e-learning centers in various parts of the country. Despite these initiatives, online learning has not taken off quickly, and its widespread adoption has been hampered by a lack of resources and infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic's transition to online education has brought attention to the nation's digital gap, as many students lack access to dependable internet and essential technology (Agyei et al., 2020). Additionally, many students have had to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of online learning, adapting to new technologies and teaching methods.

Studying the Perspectives of Students throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional modes of education globally, including in Ghana. As universities and other educational institutions adopt online learning, it is essential to examine the experiences of students during this transition period. Understanding the challenges and opportunities of online learning will enable educators and policymakers to address the gaps and ensure that students have a seamless learning experience (Osei-Kofi et al., 2020).

Studying university students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it will provide insights into the effectiveness of online learning in Ghana. As online learning becomes more prevalent, it is crucial to assess its effectiveness in achieving learning outcomes. Secondly, it will enable educators to understand the unique challenges that students face during this period and develop appropriate interventions to support them. Finally, it will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, which could inform future pandemic response plans.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges and opportunities of online learning for university students in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study aims to investigate students' experiences with online learning, the impact of online learning on their academic performance, and the factors that influence their engagement and participation in online learning.

Research Questions for the Study

1. What are the experiences of university students in Ghana with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How does online learning affect the academic performance of university students in Ghana?

3. What factors influence university students' engagement and participation in online learning in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic?

4. What are the challenges and opportunities of online learning for university students in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic?

5. What recommendations can be made to improve the quality of online learning for university students in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, which was developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). The CoI model is a

theoretical framework that describes how learners construct meaning and knowledge in an online community through social, cognitive, and teaching presences. According to Garrison et al. (2000), online learning communities require three interdependent presences: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence.

Social presence refers to the ability of learners to perceive each other as real people and establish a sense of community. Cognitive presence refers to the process of constructing meaning through reflection, discourse, and inquiry. Teaching presence refers to the design and facilitation of online learning activities that promote cognitive and social presence.

In the context of this study, the CoI model provides a theoretical lens for understanding the challenges and opportunities of online learning for university students in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the model can help to identify the factors that influence social, cognitive, and teaching presences in online learning environments, and how these presences impact students' experiences with online learning. Additionally, the CoI model can guide the design and implementation of interventions that promote social, cognitive, and teaching presences to improve the quality of online learning for university students in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Online Learning in Ghana: Opportunities and Challenges

The adoption of online learning in Ghana is gaining momentum due to its potential to improve access to education and enhance the quality and relevance of learning (Amankwah-Amoah, 2020). However, the effective implementation of online learning in Ghana is influenced by several factors, including infrastructure, technology, funding, and pedagogical approaches.

One of the significant barriers to the effective implementation of online learning in Ghana is the lack of access to reliable internet connectivity and digital devices (Boateng & Asabere-Ameyaw, 2020). This challenge is particularly prevalent in rural and remote areas of the country, where access to digital technology is limited. However, the use of mobile devices, such as smartphones, can enhance access to online learning in these areas (Achiampong & Buabeng-Andoh, 2021).

The effectiveness of online learning in Ghana is also dependent on the pedagogical approaches used. Learner-centered approaches that focus on active learning and collaboration have been found to be effective in promoting meaningful engagement and enhancing learning outcomes (Amankwah-Amoah, 2020). Therefore, the adoption of such approaches in online learning can improve the quality and relevance of education in Ghana.

Furthermore, online learning has the potential to promote inclusive education in Ghana by providing access to education for marginalized and disadvantaged groups, such as girls, children with disabilities, and those living in poverty (Osei-Kofi, 2020). However, to ensure the success and sustainability of online learning in Ghana, the involvement of stakeholders such as teachers, students, parents, and policymakers is crucial (Boateng & Asabere-Ameyaw, 2020).

Finally, the use of online learning in Ghana can enhance the quality and relevance of education by providing access to global educational resources and enabling cross-cultural exchange (Achimpong & Buabeng-Andoh, 2021). This can broaden students' perspectives, promote cultural understanding, and prepare them for the global economy.

The adoption of online learning in Ghana presents several opportunities and challenges. While the lack of access to digital technology and reliable internet connectivity remains a significant challenge, the use of mobile devices and learner-centered pedagogical approaches can enhance access to education and improve learning outcomes. The involvement of stakeholders and

the promotion of inclusive education can ensure the success and sustainability of online learning in Ghana, ultimately enhancing the quality and relevance of education in the country.

Previous Studies On Online Learning in Ghana

Online learning in Ghana and other developing countries has been the subject of several studies in recent years. These studies have explored the opportunities and challenges of online learning and highlighted factors that influence its effectiveness.

For example, a study by Tchombe and Abia (2021) examined the perceptions of students and teachers towards online learning in Cameroon, Ghana, and Nigeria. The study found that while online learning offered opportunities for flexible and self-paced learning, challenges such as the lack of access to digital technology and reliable internet connectivity hindered its effectiveness. Similarly, a study by Muganda and Kyamanywa (2020) explored the challenges of implementing online learning in Rwanda. The study found that the lack of infrastructure, inadequate training for teachers and students, and limited access to digital devices were significant barriers to the effective implementation of online learning in the country.

In a study by Mugenda and Mugenda (2020), the authors explored the factors that influence the adoption of online learning in Kenya. The study found that factors such as the availability of digital technology, infrastructure, and funding were crucial to the effective implementation of online learning in the country.

Other studies have focused on the pedagogical approaches used in online learning. For example, a study by Mulenga and Chansa-Kabali (2021) examined the effectiveness of a learner-centered approach to online learning in Zambia. The study found that the approach improved students' engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. Several studies have explored the opportunities and challenges of online learning in Ghana and other developing countries. These studies highlight the importance of factors such as infrastructure, technology, funding, and pedagogical approaches in the effective implementation of online learning.

Impact of COVID-19 on education and Online Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on education worldwide, leading to widespread school closures and a shift towards online learning. School closures and the shift towards online learning have disrupted education for millions of students worldwide (UNESCO, 2021). As of March 2021, UNESCO estimated that over 800 million students were affected by school closures, with many countries transitioning to remote or hybrid learning models to ensure continuity of learning (UNESCO, 2021).

Online learning has emerged as a key strategy to address the challenges posed by school closures, providing a way to deliver education remotely and ensure continuity of learning (Hodges et al., 2020). However, the rapid shift towards online learning has highlighted existing inequalities in access to digital technology and internet connectivity, particularly in developing countries (UNESCO, 2020).

Moreover, research suggests that the quality of online learning experiences during the pandemic has been mixed, with concerns about student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2021). Students from marginalized and disadvantaged groups have been particularly affected, with concerns about widening inequalities in education.

The pandemic has also had significant impacts on teachers, with many having to rapidly adapt to new teaching methods and technologies (Fernandez et al., 2020). The shift towards online

learning has highlighted the importance of teacher training and support to ensure effective implementation of online learning.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of university students in Ghana with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research was appropriate for investigating complex social phenomena and generating in-depth understanding of human experiences (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, a phenomenological approach was used to understand how students experience online learning during the pandemic (Moustakas, 1994).

Sample

The sample consisted of 20 university students in Ghana who had experienced online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that a diverse range of students from different disciplines, socioeconomic backgrounds, and regions are included in the study. The sample size was determined by data saturation, which is reached when no new information or themes emerge from the data (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allow for a flexible and in-depth exploration of participants' experiences (Patton, 2015). The interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and phone, depending on the participants' preferences and access to technology. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and included open-ended questions to elicit rich and detailed responses from participants.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying patterns and themes in the data and interpreting their meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis was conducted in several steps, including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing, and refining themes, and defining and naming themes. The analysis was conducted by two researchers to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study is conducted in accordance with ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Participants are provided with a consent form that outlines the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the procedures for ensuring confidentiality. They were also informed that they can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Ensuring Validity and Reliability of the Study

The study employed several measures to ensure its reliability and validity. The research design and data collection process were well-documented, and data triangulation was used to corroborate findings. Member checking was conducted to validate the data collected, and the study's limitations were acknowledged to avoid overgeneralization. These measures aimed to ensure that the study's findings accurately reflected the experiences of university students in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESULTS

The data collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 university students in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: challenges faced during online learning, opportunities presented by online learning, and coping strategies employed by students.

Challenges Faced during Online Learning

The first theme that emerged from the analysis was the challenges faced by students during online learning. The most reported challenge was a lack of reliable internet connectivity, which made it difficult for students to access online learning materials and attend virtual classes. Some students also reported difficulty in staying motivated and focused while learning online, as they missed the social interactions and support provided by traditional in-person classes. Other challenges reported by students included a lack of access to necessary technology and devices, inadequate training and support for online learning, and difficulty in managing time and balancing competing demands.

Opportunities Presented by Online Learning

The second theme that emerged from the analysis was the opportunities presented by online learning. Students reported that online learning provided them with flexibility and convenience, allowing them to learn at their own pace and from any location. Some students also reported that online learning provided them with access to a wider range of resources and experts, including international speakers and scholars.

Coping Strategies Employed by Students

The third theme that emerged from the analysis was the coping strategies employed by students to navigate the challenges of online learning. Students reported using a variety of strategies, including developing structured study schedules, seeking support from peers and instructors, and utilizing offline resources when internet connectivity was poor. Some students also reported developing mindfulness practices to help them stay focused and motivated during online learning. The study findings suggest that while online learning presents significant challenges for students in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic, it also offers opportunities for flexible and innovative approaches to education. The coping strategies employed by students can inform the development of effective support mechanisms and interventions to enhance the effectiveness of online learning in the Ghanaian context.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore university students' experiences in Ghana navigating the challenges and opportunities of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed that students faced several challenges, including poor internet connectivity, lack of access to necessary technology, and difficulty managing time and motivation. However, students also reported some benefits of online learning, such as flexibility and increased independence.

The results of this study align with previous research that has explored the challenges and opportunities of online learning. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model provides a useful framework for understanding the experiences of university students in online learning environments. According to the CoI model, there are three overlapping domains that contribute to the development of a successful online learning experience: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

In terms of social presence, the findings of this study suggest that students experienced a sense of isolation and detachment in the online learning environment. This finding is consistent with previous research that has highlighted the importance of social interactions in online learning (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). One potential solution to this challenge is to create opportunities for students to engage in online discussions and group projects, which can help foster a sense of community and belonging in the virtual classroom.

Regarding cognitive presence, the study found that students struggled with managing their time and motivation in the online learning environment. This finding is also consistent with previous research that has identified time management as a significant challenge in online learning (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). One potential solution is to provide students with clear expectations and deadlines for assignments and to offer support and resources for time management and study skills.

Lastly, in terms of teaching presence, students reported mixed experiences with their instructors. Some students felt that their instructors were supportive and engaged, while others felt that their instructors were distant and uninvolved. This finding highlights the importance of the instructor's role in online learning and the need for instructors to provide clear guidance, feedback, and support to their students.

This study adds to the growing body of literature on the challenges and opportunities of online learning and highlights the importance of considering the CoI model in designing and implementing online courses. The findings also provide insights into the experiences of university students in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic, which can be used to inform future efforts to improve online learning experiences for students in similar contexts.

Implications of the Findings for Online Learning Policy and Practice in Ghana and beyond

Based on the findings of the study, there are several implications for online learning policy and practice in Ghana and beyond.

Firstly, policymakers and educators need to prioritize the provision of reliable and affordable internet connectivity, as this was identified as a major challenge for many students in the study. Improving access to the internet can help to ensure that students are able to fully participate in online learning and reduce the risk of students falling behind due to technological barriers.

Secondly, the study highlights the need for educators to adopt a more student-centered approach to online learning, which involves providing students with opportunities for interaction,

collaboration, and feedback. This aligns with the principles of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, which emphasizes the importance of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence in online learning.

Thirdly, educators and policymakers need to ensure that online learning platforms are designed with the specific needs and contexts of students in mind. This includes considerations such as language, culture, and access to technology. For example, the study found that some students preferred to use WhatsApp and other social media platforms to communicate with their peers and instructors, highlighting the need for more flexible and adaptable online learning platforms.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of providing adequate support and resources to students to help them navigate the challenges and opportunities of online learning. This includes providing training on how to use online learning platforms effectively, providing access to academic support services, and addressing the mental health and wellbeing needs of students during the pandemic. These implications have relevance not only for Ghana but also for other countries facing similar challenges and opportunities in the context of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. By taking these implications into account, policymakers and educators can help to ensure that online learning is accessible, effective, and inclusive for all students.

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, there are a few limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the findings. One of the main limitations is the small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or populations. Additionally, this study focused on university students in Ghana and may not reflect the experiences of other populations or levels of education. Furthermore, the subjective nature of the data collected may have been influenced by participants' biases or perspectives, which may limit the objectivity of the findings.

Directions for Future Research

Future research can build on this study by investigating the experiences of different populations, such as primary and secondary school students, teachers, and parents. Additionally, future research can explore the impact of different online learning modalities, such as asynchronous vs. synchronous learning, on student experiences and outcomes. Another avenue for future research is to investigate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at addressing the challenges identified in this study, such as improving digital literacy skills or providing social support through online platforms. Finally, future research can investigate the long-term effects of online learning on student learning outcomes and future career prospects.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study explored the experiences of university students in Ghana navigating the challenges and opportunities of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study findings provide insights into the various challenges faced by students in adapting to the online learning environment, including the lack of access to devices and internet connectivity, inadequate training for online learning, and the negative impact of online learning on social interaction and motivation. However, the study also highlights the opportunities presented by online learning, such as the flexibility it provides and the potential for increased access to education.

The findings of this study have significant implications for online learning policy and practice in Ghana and beyond, including the need to address the digital divide and provide support for students to adapt to the online learning environment. The study also emphasizes the importance of considering the social and emotional aspects of online learning and the need to ensure that online learning does not have a negative impact on student motivation and engagement.

The study has some limitations, including the small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings, and the subjective nature of the data collected, which may have been influenced by participants' biases or perspectives. Future research could explore the experiences of other stakeholders in the online learning process, such as instructors and administrators, and could also investigate the long-term effects of online learning on student learning outcomes and employability. This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of university students in Ghana navigating the challenges and opportunities of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlights the need for ongoing support and attention to ensure that online learning is accessible, equitable, and effective.

Contribution of the Study to the Field of Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

This study on the experiences of university students in Ghana navigating the challenges and opportunities of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the field in several ways. Firstly, it has provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by students in a developing country context, which can inform policy and practice in Ghana and similar contexts.

Secondly, the study has highlighted the importance of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model in promoting student engagement, social presence, and cognitive presence in online learning environments. This finding reinforces the significance of the CoI model as a framework for designing and facilitating effective online learning experiences.

Lastly, the study has shed light on the need for more support and resources for students and faculty to effectively navigate online learning during the pandemic. This finding has important implications for the design of online learning policies and programs that prioritize the provision of resources and support to ensure equitable access and success for all learners. This study has contributed to the growing body of research on online learning during the pandemic and provided valuable insights into the experiences of university students in Ghana. The findings have important implications for policy and practice in Ghana and beyond and offer directions for future research to further enhance our understanding of the challenges and opportunities of online learning in the context of the pandemic.

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