

Understanding the COVID-19 Impacts on Social Work Learning Through the Lens of Planned Behavior Theory

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Abstract: *COVID-19 was a global pandemic that caused higher education to enter emergency distance learning. Students experienced a myriad of emotional and psychological stressors during this pandemic. While the demand for online learning has been steadily increasing, even in the field of social work, it has nonetheless lagged behind other disciplines due to concerns about limited interpersonal interactions. We attempted to understand students' intentions, behaviors, and outcomes related to the distance learning method during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Planned Behavior Theory. We used a cross-sectional qualitative study containing some quantitative questions. Study data was drawn from 13 interviews conducted at two Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs) in North Texas. Findings of our study included three major themes: challenges and stressors; attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control that increased intentions and adaptive behaviors; and resource gaps that interfered with adaptive behaviors. Exploring students' perceptions and behavioral responses to learning provides identification of new or hidden pedagogical obstacles and novel approaches to address the challenges in Social Work education. The study findings can contribute to improving resources and addressing gaps in the curriculum as we continue to think critically and creatively about virtual education in the future.*

Keywords: *Distance learning; planned behavior theory; COVID-19 pandemic; online learning; social work*

In March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic (Lee et al., 2021). Similar to many communities across the nation, North Texas began closing all non-essential businesses and organizations in an effort to reduce the spread of the virus. Higher education was no exception. Indeed, higher education institutions were forced to quickly adapt to remote and/or hybrid learning formats which impacted students significantly (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2021). Social work programs were also affected. Due to social work programs' historical emphasis on “hands on learning” (Shklarski & Ray, 2021, p. 506), transitioning all coursework to distance formats was particularly challenging for both students and faculty. Moreover, although the US Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) offered guidance on modified field education hours and virtual formats, issues of technological deficits and/or lack of computers negatively impacted learning (CSWE 2025 Melero et al., 2021). These challenges compounded other pandemic related stressors of emotional and psychological hardships from the loss of finances and employment, lack of resources, isolation, fear of the unknown, the sudden transition to online learning, and

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subsequent depression, and anxiety (Brooks et al., 2020). The combination of these sudden forced adaptations and losses affected individuals emotionally, socially, physiologically, and psychologically (Lee et al., 2021).

This article explores the impact of COVID-19 on social work students at two mid-sized Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs) in the North Texas, United States and examines what occurs when there are sudden shifts in educational delivery. HSIs are one category of United States (US) minority serving higher education institutions that serve underrepresented populations (US Department of the Interior, n.d.). HSIs are higher education institutions where at least 25% of undergraduate student enrollment are Hispanic students. The universities in this study were located in a residential area within a larger urban metroplex. The majority of students at both campuses were black, indigenous, and persons of color (BIPOC), 57% and 59%, respectively and close to half were first generation students 54% and 41.5% (Texas Woman's University [TWU], 2024; University of North Texas [UNT], 2023, 2024). Students attending HSIs during the pandemic were more likely to experience economic hardships, isolation, food insecurity, and financial stress due to persistent US structural and social inequalities exacerbated by COVID-19 (Ibarra-Mejia et al., 2022; Manboard et al., 2021). Thus, an understanding of internal and external factors that influenced learning responses during a crisis such as a global pandemic, can provide valuable information to both universities and social work programs regarding novel barriers and effective actions. The lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior is used to explore students' intentions, behaviors, and outcomes related to factors that influenced learning responses, such as the immediate integration of technology.

Literature Review

Background

The outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 began in Wuhan, China in December of 2019. By January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) identified this virus as the one responsible for a highly infectious respiratory virus called COVID-19 (Marinoni et al., 2020). Within a few short months, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic that triggered lockdowns worldwide in which all non-essential businesses, organizations, and human service organizations were closed to face-to-face transactions (Dutta et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2021). Higher education was also adversely affected. By April of 2020, institutions in 185 countries were closed, classroom teaching had been replaced by distance learning, and in the US, 1,100 colleges and universities within all 50 states canceled face-to-face classes (Marinoni et al., 2020; National Association of College and University Business Officers [NACUBO], 2021).

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Higher Education

Worldwide, higher education institutions were faced with the challenges of shifting immediately from face-to-face to virtual learning (CDC, 2021; Khan, 2021). Challenges included both student and faculty access, proficiency, and support for complete virtual or technology-mediated learning (Berger et al., 2022, p. 43; F). These shifts to remote learning

could have exacerbated stress and anxiety already present due to the uncertainties and health-related worries due to the virus, sudden social changes, isolation and loneliness, subsequent economic interruptions, and job loss among educators and students (Dempsey et al., 2022; Fox, 2021; Khan, 2021; Lee et al., 2021). As the pandemic continued, institutional enrollments and retention of students were impacted. HSIs like other universities around the country also experienced a drop in enrollment, however, the most significant drops were reported among Hispanic, undergraduate females (Mshigeni et al., 2022). A combination of issues appeared to impact enrollment. The NACUBO (2021) reported that in the fall of 2021, enrolments were impacted by an inability to pay due to pandemic-related job loss or changes in income, students contracting the COVID-19 virus, and/or students who had to care for others. Additional issues related to enrolments included student fatigue and frustration learning and focusing in remote environments (Bullock et al., 2022). These enrollment declines impacted institutional budgets, which limited program or course offerings in some cases and in some cases threatened the financial sustainability of programs and/or institutions (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020; Farnell et al., 2021).

However, disparities caused or exacerbated by the pandemic affected some more than others. For example, even before the pandemic, degree completion rates remained low among Hispanic students: 16% compared to 40% among their Caucasian counterparts (Arbelo et al., 2019; Johnson & Galy, 2013). Additionally, in a document analysis of 39 manuscripts studying the effect of the pandemic on higher education, one third of first generation college students reported experiencing anxiety, and one quarter reported more difficulties completing studies at home (Khan, 2021). The sudden shift to remote learning may have compounded these issues. Indeed, diverse learners' historically have lower enrollment rates in fully online courses (Arbelo et al., 2019; Johnson & Galy, 2013). Reasons may include learner anxiety and lack of training, particularly among first generation college students who may have primarily used technology recreationally, and perceptions of lack of online instructor attention and support (Arbelo et al., 2019; Lu & Vela, 2015). Lee et al. (2021) adds that students of color carried an unequal burden of financial stress, limited healthcare resources, illness and death impacting them, their families, and their communities. In some cases, these issues were compounded by a lack of institutional support such as a lack of empathy, unclear financial aid, and work-study policies during the height of the pandemic (Berger et al., 2022).

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Social Work Discipline

Social work like other academic disciplines faced the challenge of adapting almost immediately to fully remote learning. However, social work education programs typically have both practical and clinical components often taught as experiential face-to-face components, and as Berger et al. (2022) suggests "is a cornerstone in social work courses" (p. 43). Wilkerson et al. (2020) go further and emphasize that social work education as well as social service organizations have historically had an uneasy relationship with technology and limited technological training. Although there has been development in the last two decades of online social work programs that demonstrated equitable outcomes, in a survey of 126 US social work faculty, 65% reported they had never taught remotely (Shklarski &

Ray, 2021). Thus the required virtual teaching adaptations presented particular challenges for social work education administrators and faculty (Shklarski & Ray, 2021).

Impact on Students

Being overwhelmed and anxious were common emotions experienced by students during the pandemic, as were confusion, fear, anger and sadness (Berger et al., 2022; Dempsey et al., 2022). Indeed, even before the pandemic, social work students historically might have experienced more issues with anxiety and emotional regulation due to preexisting mental health issues, vicarious (field-related) trauma, field education challenges such as decision making and confidence in use of skills (Dempsey et al., 2022). Students already working in the social work field reported the stress of dual adaptations to online learning and facilitating telehealth practices. Work adaptations often called for longer hours in which student practitioners reported being on call 24/7 (Berger et al., 2022). Specific learning issues included access issues to reliable internet service, equipment such as laptops, and/or a safe and quiet space to join classes (Keesler et al., 2022; Shklarski & Ray, 2021).

The intersection of student diversity and the pandemic created additional layers of stress. For example, compared to other disciplines, social work U.S. student composition is diverse (i.e., about 30% are non-white and about 20% LGBTQ+; Berger et al., 2022). Thus, as Berger et al. (2022) argue, students were more likely to experience multiple traumatizing events. The killing of George Floyd, for example, an unarmed black man killed by a white police officer, occurred during the pandemic; an intersecting traumatic event fueled by racism. Additionally, many social work students are non-traditional students and have family and added caregiving responsibilities (Berger et al., 2022). Mshigeni et al. (2022) provides examples of adult, Hispanic students attending California HSI institutions, half of whom worked more than 30 hours a week. Other research indicated that students attending an HSI during the pandemic were more likely to experience increased levels of stress related to limited resources and economic disparities as well as higher levels of anxiety and depression (Ibarra-Mejia et al., 2022; Manboard et al., 2021; Mshigeni et al., 2022). These structural barriers were echoed by Fariña et al. (2021) who noted that some social work students at an HSI did not have access to computers, internet, a quiet place to study or in some cases, housing or food resources. Finally, Dempsey et al. (2022) noted “lapses of empathy” (p. 18) experienced and documented by students as part of their COVID experiences which could be attributed to the complex needs of all players during a pandemic crisis, but also a need for increased resources and staffing to support students. Thus, students experienced inconsistent support.

Theoretical Framework

The Theory of Planned Behavior was used to understand students’ intentions and behaviors in regard to learning and teaching adaptations necessitated by the pandemic. As a framework to study attitudes toward behaviors, the Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that the stronger a person’s intention to perform a particular behavior, the more likely the behavior will be performed (Ajzen, 1991).

Three core constructs that predict behavioral intentions are attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. The first construct, attitude, is the degree to which an individual has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior of interest (Ajzen, 1991). Subjective norms refer to whether most people approve or disapprove of the behavior. Subjective norms relate to a person's perceptions about the social pressures associated with carrying out the behavior. Perceived behavioral control indicates that a person's motivation is influenced by their perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behavior of interest (Ajzen, 1991).

Essentially, the Theory of Planned Behavior contends that high levels of intention to perform a behavior are connected with positive attitudes, subjective norms regarding a behavior, and heightened perceived behavioral control (Sheeran et al., 2001). Correspondingly, the stronger the intention to take part in a behavior, the more likely the behavior will be performed (Ajzen, 1991; See Figure 1).

Several similar studies have applied the Theory of Planned Behavior to explore various aspects of COVID-19 intentions and behaviors. For instance, Wollast et al. (2021) used this model to explore the health behaviors that can slow the spread of the virus. Mao et al. (2021) investigated the factors that influence preventive behaviors. Dou et al. (2022) and Reyes et al. (2023) used the framework to predict people's COVID-19 vaccination intentions. Lastly, Jilani (2024) applied the model to explore social distancing behaviors during the pandemic.

Thus, for the purpose of this study, the Theory of Planned Behavior will serve as a framework to identify perceived behavioral control or lack of control, adaptive attitudinal and behavioral changes, and obstacles to behavior change experienced during a pandemic.

Figure 1. *Theory of Planned Behavior Adapted From Ajzen (1991)*

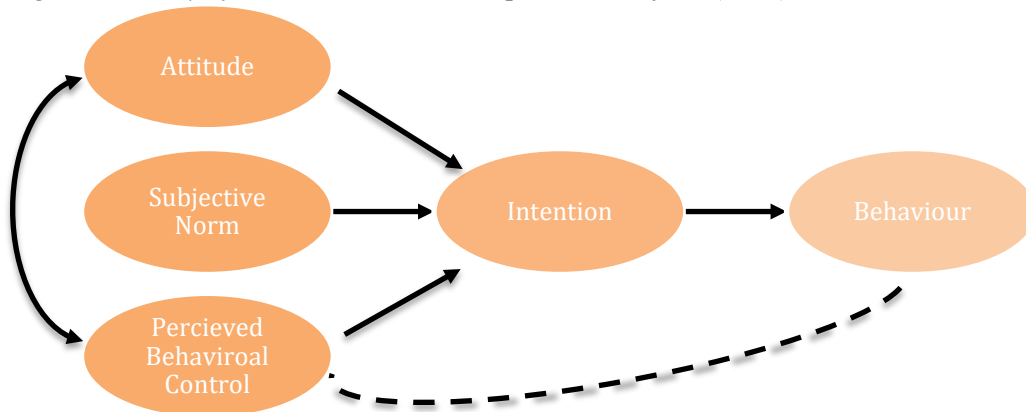
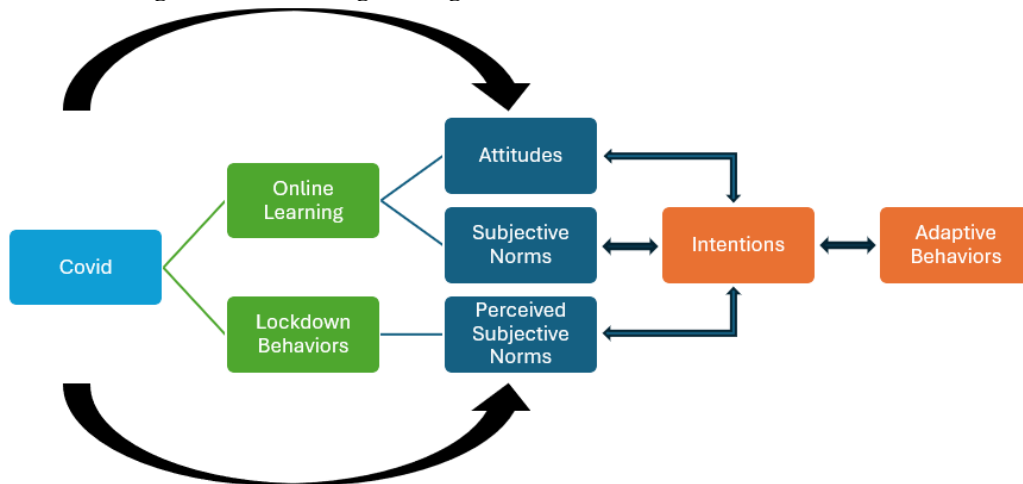


Figure 2. *The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) as a Framework for Understanding Online Learning During COVID-19*



Methods

Design and Data Collection

We used an exploratory, cross-sectional qualitative study containing some quantitative questions to understand the impact of Social Work students' perceptions and responses to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two HSIs in North Texas were selected to recruit Social Work students. These HSIs were selected purposely due to ease of access to the population. All of the researchers were also from these two institutions. Although these institutions are HSIs, they serve more than just Hispanic or Latinx students. These institutions offer both BSW and MSW degrees using traditional in-person teaching methods. However, during the pandemic, both institutions offered a combination of synchronous and asynchronous course delivery.

Upon securing university Institutional Review Board approval, we used a flier to recruit BSW and MSW students between August 2021 and February 2022. We specifically sought students who were enrolled during the pandemic and thus had distance learning experiences, and were willing to share these experiences.

A total of 13 students participated in this study. Eight students participated from one institution and five from the other. These students were recruited based on their availability and willingness to participate. Virtual interviews were conducted in English using a semi-structured questionnaire (Appendix A) to collect qualitative data. These semi-structured questions were aligned with the Planned Behavior Theory. We used questions that aligned with perceptions of control or lack of control, and adaptive behaviors. Examples included, "What challenges did participants perceive as beyond their control?" "What behaviors and intentions did participants use that increased control?" "What resource gaps did participants identify that were obstacles to adaption or coping?" Most of the participants in

our study were Hispanic (85.6%) and from BSW programs (76.9%). Interviews were approximately sixty minutes long. The sample size and length of the interviews were aligned with qualitative methodological standards, as we used a homogeneous sample and continued data collection until data saturation was achieved (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Draucker et al., 2007; Guest et al., 2006). Secured virtual interviews were conducted through Zoom using the participant's pseudonym and audio record option only. Researchers used their office space to conduct the virtual interviews, and participants chose the best location for them to join the interview. Numeric data were also collected through a PsychData survey and consisted of demographic, categorical, and Likert questions regarding learning resources, behaviors, and perceptions. Recruited participants received the survey link via email to complete it before joining the virtual interview. Participants provided written consent before participating in this study. Each participant received a \$20 gift card as compensation for their time.

Data Analysis

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed into word document files. Transcripts were considered written representations of the students' oral stories of their learning experiences. This study was conducted by six social work researchers. Among them, four researchers independently coded (Appendix B) the data using a deductive, thematic approach or a top-down approach that aligned with and used a Theory of Planned Behavior framework to code themes across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Clark, 2017). Among these four researchers, two are experts in conducting qualitative study and publishing their work regularly. Other two coders were trained to work on this. We viewed each student's story as a whole and emphasized knowing each student's experience and behavioral adaptations. We relied on core tenets of Planned Behavior Theory: attitudes, norms and perceived behavioral control and intention (Ajzen, 1991), to analyze the data. In this study, perceived control was control that students believed they had or did not have during the pandemic. Intention was their intent to perform a behavior. Consistent with Planned Behavior Theory, we pointed out areas of perceived lack of control and shifts stemming from different attitudes, norms and intentions that led to behavioral adaptation. We focused our analysis on three categories: challenges and stressors; attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control that increased intentions and adaptive behaviors; and resource gaps that interfered with adaptive behaviors. Numeric data was also analyzed using descriptive statistics. Validity was established through the triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data. Reliability was demonstrated through establishing coding protocols and having independent researchers check the transcripts.

Findings

Quantitative Results

The average age of the participants was 19 which ranged from 19 to 28 years (see Table 1). Although 53.8% of the participants resided in their own place, 92.3% of the participants mentioned that they had to share their living space. Scholarship (46.2%) was the primary

source to pay the tuition fees for most of the participants. Over three-fifths (61.5%) of the participants mentioned the face-to-face learning method as their preferred method. It was interesting to find that more than half of the participants mentioned their GPA was about the same before and during COVID-19. More than three-fourths (76.9%) of the participants mentioned distance learning course instruction during COVID-19 was “somewhat clear” whereas only 7.7% mentioned, “not clear”; and 30.1% informed they were dissatisfied with the distance learning experience (see Table 2). Also, most of the participants confirmed that they experienced moderate disruption in their learning process during COVID-19. Most of the participants experienced mental health problems (61.5%) and financial crises (23.1%) during this period.

Table 1. *Demographic Description of the Study Sample*
(*n* = 9-13)

	Median
Age (range = 19-28 years)	19
	n (%)
Academic Programs	
BSW	10 (76.9%)
MSW	3 (23.1%)
Hispanic students	
Hispanic	11 (84.6%)
Non-Hispanic	2 (15.4%)
Reside	
Student housing	2 (15.4%)
Own home/apartment	7 (53.8%)
Other	4 (30.76%)
Living Arrangement	
Do not share space	1 (7.7%)
Share space	12 (92.3%)
Way of Managing Tuition Fee	
Student loan /financial aid	2 (15.4%)
Scholarship	6 (46.2%)
Parent(s)/partner paid	1 (7.7%)
Savings	1 (7.7%)
Other	3 (23.1%)
GPA Before COVID-19	
Much better	1 (7.7%)
Better	3 (23.1%)
About the same	8 (61.5%)
Worse	1 (7.7%)
The Learning Method Like Most	
Face-to-face	8 (88.9%)
Online	1 (11.1%)

Table 2. Learning Experiences During COVID-19 (n = 13)

Learning Experience	n (%)
The distance learning experience during COVID-19	
Satisfied	6 (46.1%)
Neither satisfied/ dissatisfied	3 (23.1%)
Dissatisfied	4 (30.8%)
Impacts of COVID-19 on learning	
Major disruption	4 (30.8%)
Moderate disruption	8 (61.5%)
No disruption	1 (7.7%)
Clarity of online course instructions during COVID-19 learning	
Very clear	2 (15.4%)
Somewhat clear	10 (77.0%)
Not clear	1 (7.7%)
Barriers experienced to completing courses during COVID-19	
Unable to get access to resources	1 (7.7%)
Unclear instruction	2 (15.4%)
Mental health problem	8 (61.5%)
Financial/job crisis	3 (23.1%)

Qualitative Findings

We used our Theory of Planned Behavior framework to identify and examine challenges or stressors experienced by social work students during the pandemic as well as shifts in attitudinal, normative, and perceived control that increased adaptive behavioral responses to these challenges. We also examined stressors that interfered with adaptive responses.

Emergent subthemes in the category of challenges and stressors included learning challenges, mental health challenges, and environmental challenges.

Table 3. Themes and Subthemes

Theme and Subtheme	Brief Examples
Challenges and Stressors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning • Mental Health • Environmental 	“I needed to really concentrate, but there was no quiet place.” “My anxiety so high because, when it started ...” “The boundaries between schoolwork and home life were blurred.”
Attitudes, Subjective Norms, and Perceived Behavioral Control That Increased Intentions and Adaptive Behaviors	“Recognizing you know this is a humbling experience for everyone.”
Resource Gaps That Interfered With Adaptive Behaviors	“It was so unorganized and it was so hard to know what was going on.”

Challenges and Stressors

Learning Challenges. Learning challenges were those areas in which participants noted significant and unavoidable challenges to learning. Workspace was a common issue. For example, one participant noted “I needed to really concentrate, but there was no quiet place.” Additional issues highlighted included family distractions when members walked in and out of workspace as well as the number of persons living in the household. As noted by a participant: “I live with a lot of other people.”

While some participants noted they had taken online courses previously, the abrupt transition and transition of all courses to a distance format, in which students had no choice, interfered with focus. Participants described fears of “because everything was online, am I really grasping my information?” As well as additional time needed to grasp information: “it felt like I had to learn how to comprehend all over again.” One student described an unaddressed need as a “space even after class with one another to talk about what we just learned...make sure that each one of us understood.” Finally, motivation to learn and succeed in online settings was described as one of the biggest challenges.

Mental Health Challenges. This lack of motivation was noted as an outcome of mental health challenges experienced during the pandemic. One participant described this as, “a big decline in my mental health... I guess I got unmotivated and I felt like there was no reason to really look forward to learning honestly. It all felt the same every day.” Yet similar to other studies, anxiety was a common mental health challenge experienced by participants as they attempted to navigate sudden changes within school and work (Berger et al., 2022; Brooks et al., 2020). Stressors were described by one participant as “I got laid off from my job because they didn’t need me anymore ‘cause I was a part time student so that was hard for me and then with that my mental health kind of got lower and lower...and then because my siblings came and I had to take care of them.” Other participants described having to work during the pandemic, “my anxiety so high because, when it started, I was also working...So it's just a lot of people all the time; a lot of us were getting sick and like nobody knew what to do.”

Pandemic related isolation was also emphasized as a reason for mental health decline, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic. Severed connections with family and friends were described, “it did impact my family's relationship for one, like my immediate family, they live further away. So I wasn't able to go see them...and that really messed with my emotional health because I'm close to them,” and as another participant described, suddenly their bedroom became “every place.”

Environmental Challenges. Blended boundaries between home and school, caring for family members, lack of consistent Wi-Fi, and unemployment were some of the environmental challenges described by participants as beyond their control. Blended boundaries created a sense of never having time to relax. “The boundaries between schoolwork and home life were blurred...I wish I could have just left school stuff at school so it doesn’t, you know, eat away at my personal life.” Caring for children and extended family members were also described as stressful when learning and attempting to work

online. Participants who were forced to take employment outside the home described anxieties of bringing COVID home to loved ones.

Although social work programs at both universities attempted to provide consistency through using the same learning management system (LMS), Canvas, to deliver curriculum, Zoom to deliver synchronous courses, and LMS and a variety of online training for both faculty and students, inconsistencies in internet access were issues for some students. Lack of consistent Wi-Fi was a problem, and one participant described going to a local fast-food restaurant for their synchronous online courses. Indeed, Mshigeni et al. (2022) noted that the digital divide was amplified during the pandemic for Hispanic and Black students.

Perhaps the biggest stressor, however, was unavoidable job loss and having to find other employment. Participants described their own job loss, loss of work study positions at universities, loss of spousal employment, and loss of other family members' employment, for example, "other members of my household, lost employment. So I had to start helping with my personal money."

Attitudes, Subjective Norms, and Perceived Behavioral Control That Increased Intentions and Adaptive Behaviors

As the pandemic progressed, some participants' attitudes shifted which increased perceived control, motivation, focus, and in turn, increased behaviors that encouraged academic success in online learning environments. Subjective norms as well as external pedagogical practices also supported these online learning related behavioral intentions.

Participants described how linking social work values and knowledge to their own experiences encouraged an attitude and behavioral shift. For example, one participant explained how they reevaluated the self-care ethic within the NASW Code of Ethics and made intentional choices to practice self care. Others noted that knowledge of mental health issues assisted them in identifying their own mental health needs, and adapting new coping behaviors. These included intentional behaviors to set communication boundaries with family members as well as seeking support in alternative ways. In some cases this included social work professors and classmates. As one participant described, "knowing that your classmates are kind of going through the same situation and knowing you're all kind of struggling together, like the sense of community still, you're not completely alone." Participants also noted that some professors did group "mental health checks" at the beginning or end of class and reminded them of campus resources, which increased awareness of mental health needs and encouraged intentional self-care behaviors.

Subjective norms for academic success were also emphasized. These included norms of openness such as professors sharing their own difficulties which assisted participants, "recognizing you know this is a humbling experience for everyone." Encouraging open communication led to behaviors that supported academic success. As one participant explained, "talking to my classmates and being in constant communication with my professor for clarification" and "utilize my cohort more. It just made things easier since they were just as lost as we... like I was. We kind of collaborated on ideas."

Through these attitudinal and normative shifts, participants perceived more control over their behaviors and “figured out” new ways of utilizing coping behaviors. Examples included “locating a designated workspace,” and “became more organized with time management.” Other behaviors included ways to complete work such as use of mobile devices to listen to classes, using background music to focus, and figuring out what work could be completed on phone and what needed to be done on laptops.

Resource Gaps That Interfered With Adaptive Behaviors

Despite adaptive attitudes that increased behavioral adaptations to online social work learning, resource gaps created some insurmountable barriers. These included gaps in university support services, social work department, and social work course levels.

Hours of operation and extent of services offered were common issues. For example, campus food pantries were limited due to decreased hours of operation. Additionally, campus counseling services were noted as not consistently accessible. As described by one participant,

I was getting really depressed. It was when we... I transferred over here and everything was online basically but when I went to the university counseling center, I got interviewed and they were like Oh yeah sounds like your anxiety is like at 100%...but I have no one to offer.

Other issues included needs for technological support such as students living in rural areas with inconsistent Wi-Fi or need or access (rent or buy) to low-cost laptops. Finally, loss of work-study income was another issue with one participant describing how they first lost work-study and then lost their other part-time employment.

Gaps at the social work department level included collective interactions and other forms of mentoring that took place prior to the pandemic. Participants noted that spaces to share were missing and one participant explained that “I was bottling in because everyone else was going about life like things were normal.” Others emphasized the lack of department level celebrations and made suggestions for some form of peer mentoring during future collective crises.

Participants highlighted many issues related to the individual course level. These included technological knowledge gaps of some professors which led to poorly organized courses, and weak personal connections with students. As one participant described, some professors had limited knowledge about the learning management system “it was so unorganized and it was so hard to know what was going on.” Additional issues included a lack of feedback on assessments and inconsistent zoom office hours. Field education courses were also mentioned by some students as offering less online than if students could be present on site. Finally, students noted a lack of understanding and or lack of connection, which made the transition to online learning particularly challenging, “some teachers... not all...just acting like it was going to be a smooth transition... there was gonna be no bumps in the road,” and “my professor cared more before COVID.”

Discussion

This study provided the unique perspectives and voices of social work students whose learning was impacted by COVID-19 and their transition from a face-to-face model to an online learning environment. Approximately 190 countries implemented school/university closures, impacting 1.57 billion students (Xiao & Fan, 2020). College campuses quickly pivoted to remote or online learning to minimize disruptions to students (LeBlanc, 2020). Nevertheless, disruptions in normal instructional plans significantly affected students and their abilities to connect with one another and create meaningful interactions in and out of the classroom (Das et al., 2021). HSI institutions were no different, however, similar to findings in this study, research suggests that HSI students experienced more complex issues such as financial stress, mental health issues, limited places to study, and inconsistent access to technology (Farina et al., 2021; Ibarra-Mejia et al., 2022; Manboard et al., 2021; Mshigeni et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2023). The Theory of Planned Behavior provided a framework to understand social work students' perceptions, adaptations, and obstacles that prevented adaptations.

As suggested by the Theory of Planned Behavior, motivation is influenced by perceptions of the ease or difficulty in performing a behavior and the degree of perceived control. Participants in the present study indicated a lack of control and high degrees of difficulty engaging in learning behaviors. Although students transitioning from traditional face-to-face to online learning are often at a disadvantage when it comes to creating meaningful connections with faculty and student colleagues, participants in this study faced unique challenges due to the sudden and uncontrollable shift to a distance format. These challenges included isolation, motivation, focus, support and lack of access to important mental health resources. Without adequate support, resources and mentorship, students lacked the information they needed to navigate distance education, and these challenges were exacerbated by the pandemic. Earlier research reported that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, one in five college students experienced one or more mental health disorders (Auerbach et al., 2016; Zhai & Du, 2020). However, the psychological effects of COVID-19 increased this number and compounded collegiate mental health issues (Rahman et al., 2023; Zhai & Du, 2020). Similar to the present study, college students experienced increased anxiety, increased risk for suicide and substance abuse (Zhai & Du, 2020). In a study conducted by Lee et al. (2021), 60% of college students reported an increase in anxiety, 54% reported increased depression, and nearly 60% reported increased feelings of loneliness.

It is notable that participants were able to use their social work knowledge and skills to navigate and adapt to learning challenges. Subjective norms for collective academic success were also noted by participants as helpful. These included increased reliance on members of their cohort. Wilke et al. (2009) also noted a related dynamic among online social work classes and the increased mutual aid students offered to one another. Finally, similar to Keesler et al. (2022) findings that students in synchronous, online classes appeared to desire affective focused teaching, participants in this study also indicated that openness, transparency, and affect of some professors reinforced the collective nature of

the pandemic which assisted students in both sharing their experiences and building a sense of collaboration and community.

Implications for Social Work, Pandemic Related, Online Teaching and Learning

Although student adaption to online learning improved, gaps were noted by students that interfered with their learning. These gaps included challenges at the course, department, and university levels. Bridging these gaps have implications for future social work teaching and learning particularly during times of high stress such as a pandemic.

A key gap at both the course and departmental levels were opportunities to seek mentorship and build a sense of community. At the course level, key issues included experiencing online learning as truly remote in some courses, with limited interactions or sense of community among learners and the instructor. This concern was echoed at the department level where students noted gaps in opportunities to collectively socialize and receive support. An option that could have been considered was described by Melero et al. (2021) as the implementation of a weekly zoom support meeting where social work students at an HSI university could ask questions, receive information, and gain support from faculty and peers. This provided an opportunity for the student population, comprised of mostly Latinx and first-generation college students, to destress and address complex issues exacerbated by the pandemic. Other approaches can include utilizing trauma-informed teaching methods throughout the curriculum, or understanding ways that trauma impacts all members of a community and using this knowledge to inform curriculum, and department policies (Hitchcock et al., 2021). This knowledge includes using trust and transparency in online teaching to build safe and consistent learning environments for students (Hitchcock et al., 2021).

Because of the impact of COVID-19 on the behaviors and outcomes of students who transitioned to an online learning environment, institutions should make a concerted effort to be intentional about how to introduce resources and interventions to remote students that help support them as they attempt to continue to navigate the challenges presented by the pandemic. These can include addressing biopsychosocial needs brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gross, 2021). For example, it's important for institutions to prioritize their approach to addressing the availability of essential support and resources for vulnerable college students. This might include institutions using data to track physical, emotional, and psychological health symptoms of impacted youth along with identifying vulnerable students in need of assistance. Additionally, institutions can partner with community providers to offer services to students using a telehealth model. This includes having virtual therapy session options and virtual group meetings available for students in need. At HSI institutions, it is essential to continually ensure that services are culturally relevant and effectively promoted (Ibarra-Mejia et al., 2022). Universities can also support students by ensuring that they have adequate tools to contact institutional resources in their times of crisis. This includes having access to wraparound services, addressing food insecurities, housing, rent, and other basic support needs such as funds to assist with rent payments, utilities, and cell phone and cellular services. Additionally, formal academic support that includes tutoring services, academic advising, writing centers and faculty office hours

should be available in online formats. Implementing these measures will aid students and demonstrate the commitment by institutions that they care about their students' well-being.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. The generalizability of the study is limited, due to the small sample size. Thus, readers should use caution when applying these findings to their contexts as the findings of the study cannot be generalized to all Hispanic or Latinx student communities or all social work students at HSIs. Future studies could utilize aspects of this study, such as the exploration of challenges, adaptations and gaps in social work online teaching, but use an anonymized online survey instead of focus groups to increase the sample size. Another limitation was the use of a deductive analysis approach in which the themes and subsequent meaning were linked to a preexisting framework, thus specific perspectives of participants could be missed. Future research should continue to investigate the use and impact of technology on social work teaching and learning. The use of a longitudinal design could provide relevant information on trends, best practices, and gaps. Additional considerations should include understanding the technological impact among various racial, ethnic, and gender groups by exploring interactions among demographic variables to identify potential disparities within the long-term trends.

Conclusion

This study explored the learning experiences of social work students during their abrupt transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Theory of Planned Behavior provided a framework to understand student perceptions, adaptations, and obstacles that prevented adaptations. We found significant early disruptions but also adaptations in which students were able to use social work knowledge and values to cope with the transition and other environmental stressors. Despite their adaptations, some environmental challenges specific to the learning environments created significant impediments. Thus higher education institutions generally, and social work programs specifically, should continue to intentionally monitor and provide contextually relevant support and resources for remote student learning and emergent student learning needs.

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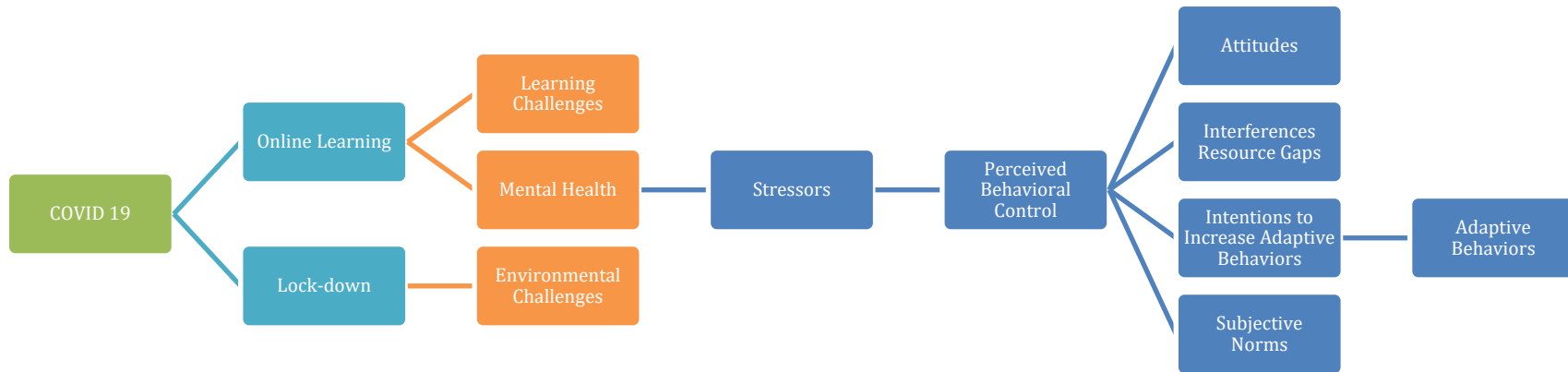
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Appendix A - Questionnaire

1. What was your experience with work space to learn from your home during COVID-19?
 - a. How did you manage to adjust with new changes/challenges?
2. What was your experience regarding access to the tools/equipment you need to learn from your home during COVID-19?
 - a. What was your experience with internet access to learn from your home during COVID-19?
 - b. How did you manage to adjust with new changes/challenges?
3. What barriers to learning, if any, did you face through online courses during COVID-19?
 - a. What strategies, if any, helped you to adjust with the online courses during COVID-19?
 - b. What types of resources, if any, would have helped you to learn online more effectively during COVID-19?
4. Have you taken an online course before COVID-19? If so, what was your experience?
 - a. How did your experience taking online courses before COVID-19 compare with taking online courses after COVID-19?
5. What were the biggest challenges, if any, to learning that you experienced during COVID-19?
 - a. How could it have been a better experience?
6. What university online resources, if any, did you use during COVID-19?
 - a. How did you find out about these resources?
 - b. What types of resources, if any, would have helped you in your academic success during COVID-19?
 - c. How, if at all, could faculties have been more resourceful in this type of challenging situation such as COVID-19?
7. How, if at all, did COVID-19 impact you financially?
8. How, if at all, did COVID-19 impact your personal life (relationship with spouse/partner/children/ family members/ friends/community members)?
 - a. How, if at all, did it impact your mental health?
9. In future, what resources, if any, can help students to continue their academic success during this type of disaster such as COVID-19?

Appendix B - Coding Tree



Context of COVID-19, lockdown and online learning in social work. Challenges and Stressors were identified and coded. The Theory of Planned Behavior was applied. Based on the framework of Planned Behavior, attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms that increased intentions of adaptive behaviors as well as interferences to adaptive behaviors were analyzed and coded.