

# Our community matters: An analysis of the students' and parents' emotions in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic

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**Abstract**—Changes in everyday activities, such as adapting to the new online format due to lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic and being far away from family and friends, greatly influenced the emotions and feelings of students and their parents. Assessing the emotions of students' parents at the higher education level is necessary since their emotional well-being has a direct impact on the emotional well-being of students throughout their distant learning experience. In this article, we held a quantitative study over 8 subsequent weeks from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in students and parents from the Mexican institution Tecnológico de Monterrey. Using a questionnaire from Inteligencia Audiencias (Intelligence Hearings), students and their parents could register their feelings and their valence from April 13<sup>th</sup> to July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The results indicate that the most predominant emotions in both groups were very unpleasant and unpleasant in nature, being “worried” and “tired” the most common ones. The current study also provides some approaches for addressing the negative repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic

**Keywords**— *Educational innovation, higher education, emotions, COVID-19 pandemic*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The social restrictions and lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were the safety measures that were implemented or lifted by the governments according to the change in the number of infections [1]. Thus, most of the educational activities transitioned to a remote format which, in turn, required a rapid adaptation to the online requirements

[2]. While the education sector was forced to go through radical changes, such quick alteration in the mode of learning has placed tremendous pressure on families as well. The prolonged restrictive measures have inflicted emotional distress in students and their parents, considerably threatening their mental health [3], [4]. Both students and their parents have undergone stress that lead to depressive symptomatology, such as lower quality of sleep, emotional exhaustion, stress, burnout and lack of motivation, among others [5], [6]. Multiple factors cause stress in parents ranging from providing their children with digital means and access to the internet and smart devices to remaining encouraging and involved in schoolwork. This, in addition to sudden changes in family routines, reallocation of the household tasks, having an extended amount of time at home, renegotiating rules around the household have exposed the entire family to increased stress and anxiety [7].

At a national level, in Mexico, over 3.4 million COVID-19 infected cases have been confirmed, and according to National Council for Science and Technology, more than 250,000 deaths were attributed to this fatal infection [8]. Among the higher education institutions within the territory, Tecnológico de Monterrey was one of the first institutions to take preventive actions towards the pandemic by transitioning all educational activities to the online mode. The interrupted teaching and learning processes required the preparation of

both faculty and students at all academic levels across 36 campuses of this institution. As the quarantine restrictions progressed, along with the early migration of activities from in-person to digital modality, the need for monitoring and assessing the feelings of the students and parents became obvious. Through multiple surveys and questionnaires, we carefully assessed the emotional well-being of not only students but also their parents to provide them with the appropriate support for a sustained learning outcome.

This article analyzes the emotion of students at the undergraduate level and their parents over the course of eight weeks in the COVID-19 pandemic, following the research question: “What are the key emotions of parents and students during the lockdown and what is the overall emotional valence in both cases?”. The results have shown a prevalence of tiredness, overwhelm, stress, and anxiety among students while there were clear emotional fluctuations in the emotion of the students over the eight weeks of this analysis. Meanwhile, the analysis of the parents’ emotions shows that they felt worried and stressed even though other positive manifestations including being thankful, optimistic, and calm were also frequently reported. Nonetheless, parents have also gone through a considerable emotional fluctuation as the weeks under lockdown progressed. We also studied the emotional valence of the students and their parents ranging from Very Unpleasant to Unpleasant, Neutral, Pleasant, and Very Pleasant. The results show a clear difference between students’ emotional valence and that of their parents. Students, in general, presented a much more negative valence compared to their parents and have experienced hardship in managing their feelings in the midst of this global challenge. These frequent assessments provided us with a profound understanding of the mental health of our community thus refined policies and renewed decisions that fit the ever-changing need of the individuals over the course of the pandemic.

## II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus presented a serious threat to public health globally and has taken the lives of more than 4 million people around the world [9]. With the goal of controlling the widespread of the infection, governments implemented social restrictions and lockdowns, hence transitioning the educational activities to the online format. As a result, the academic sector had undergone radical changes that required rapid adaptation and frequent refining of the policies to secure a sustained learning environment [10]. The prolongation of these measures has inflicted emotional distress on students and their parents threatening their mental health [11]–[13]. Students, on the one hand, have had less social contact with their friends and classmates while more exposure to social media and the pandemic-related news spread across the web. These factors combined with the pressure of a global pandemic, fear of being infected or infecting the loved ones, and load of homework and

assignment, strict measures for online exams and quizzes, and the uncertainty about the future had led to poor sleep quality, increased stress and anxiety, and depressive symptomatology [12], [14]–[16]. While increased anxiety and stress levels are frequently reported for students during exam periods [17], these symptoms have increased by three times in the course of the COVID-19 outbreak [18]. Parents, on the other hand, have shown signs of increased emotional exhaustion, stress and burnout that stem from simultaneous fulfillment of family duties and workload [19].

In Mexico, it is common for university students to live with their parents. According to recent data published by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), around 55% of university students and recent graduates live with their parents, and this percentage has been increasing by 6.5% during the previous seven years [20]. The numbers are not significantly different to that of other countries during the time of pandemic. For example, in the US approximately 52% of young adults went back to live with their parents during the pandemic [21], and in the European Union close to 50% of people aged between 18 and 34 still live at home, with Denmark, Sweden, and Finland having the lowest percentages [22]. In a recent article, researchers found that students who returned to live at home experienced declining mental health after having to coexist with their family and perceiving less parental acceptance, hence low autonomy, and less positive coping [23]. On the contrary, another study suggested that during the COVID-19 lockdown, greater levels of perceived family support appear to have been serving as a protective factor for students with anxiety [24]. However, to date no studies try to understand the relationship between parents’ and students’ emotions during the pandemic.

At the national level, in Mexico, over 3.4 million COVID-19 cases have been confirmed, and more than 250,000 deaths have been attributed to this pathology over the course of the pandemic according to the National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT) [8]. As life under lockdown progressed, the public health concerns were not limited to solely physical health but also the emotional well-being of the citizens. Thus, the government and education sector across the country offered various resources and implemented different strategies to relieve the impact of the pandemic on individuals’ mental health. Within the higher education setup, a multitude of missions were set to accomplish. To comply with safety measures, to train professors for the rapid transition to remotely teaching, to ensure sustained learning outcomes for the students, to understand the emotional, mental, financial, and other challenges the students and their families may go through, to provide services and reach out in case psychological assistance was needed, and to facilitate means for social hangout and networking events were only few to mention.

Our experience of emotions is crucial to our interactions with others, and to the social milestones that are often accomplished based upon how we think about, use, and

manage emotions in social settings [25]. RULER is a strategy that stands for Recognizing our own emotions and those of others in both psychological and physical manners, Understanding the experiences that could have caused them, Labeling emotions with the right choice of words, Expressing the emotions according to our social context, and Regulating them by using helpful strategies [26]. In this study, we reply upon the RULER methodology to understand the response of our community to the unprecedented events of COVID-19 pandemic and to further help them regulate their emotions for ensured emotional well-being of the students and their families.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The assessment of this study was made over the course of 8 weeks starting from March 13<sup>th</sup> to May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020, through a questionnaire consisting of 10 items out of which only the answers to the first 4 questions were considered for the purpose of this research. The open-ended questions in the survey allowed the students and parents to express themselves more comprehensively. To acquire information regarding the feelings and emotions of parents and students throughout the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, a questionnaire was developed on Qualtrics and distributed among parents and students alike through their unique registered email addresses. The recipients were randomly selected and the participation in this survey was entirely voluntarily. The parents' survey received a total of 1,347 responses over the course of the study, while the students' survey was answered by over 5,000 undergraduate students. Due to the volunteer nature of this questionnaire, the overall participation was approximately 5% to 7%, and with a 95% confidence level, which gives a confidence interval of 4-7%. These responses were recovered from all 36 national campuses of the institution. In order to quantitatively analyze the results of the survey, we employed descriptive statistics to represent the data.

#### A. Questionnaire

The survey was developed on Qualtrics and was sent to the randomly selected candidates via the institutional access of Tecnológico de Monterrey. Using the institutional Matrix number which is unique to each student avoided duplicated responses. The questions asked were: (1) What was your level of energy this week? (2) In one single word, how did you feel this week? (3) How pleasant or unpleasant is this emotion that you felt? (4) In addition to the previous feeling, what other feelings did you have during this week? (Maximum four) (5) You mentioned that your main feeling is unpleasant/very unpleasant, do you think that you need professional help to handle your emotions? (6) Would you like to be contacted by a specialist from the "TQueremos" program to help you in handling your emotion? (7) Have you heard about the program "Cuida tu Mente"? (8) Have you heard about the program "life@home"? (9) Have you participated in one of the "life@home" activities? (10) In your opinion, how much has the "life@home" program contributed to your emotional health and mental well-being? Questions 2 and 4 were qualitative in

nature, while the rest measured feelings in a quantitative manner. Respondents were able to choose between "very low, low, neutral, high, very high" and "very unpleasant, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, very pleasant" in response to questions 1 and 3, respectively. In order to receive a broader range of emotions, participants were given open-ended questions (2 and 4) to which they could respond with the feelings that were not on the list. For the remaining questions, participants could answer with "yes" or "no". Lastly, there was a Likert scale ranging from 1-5 (with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest) for question 10.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Student's and parent's dominant emotions

The response of the students to the questionnaire shed light on their overall emotional state and their most predominant feelings. In general, the percentage of responses depicts an overall representation of the sample that answered the survey. The analysis of the self-reported responses suggest that the students felt *Tired* (13.44% of the responses) as the pandemic progressed from week 2 of the lock down to week 8. Other more frequently reported emotions were feeling *Overwhelmed* (13.02%), *Stressed* (12.45%), and *Anxious* (9.57%) which marked the top three emotions after *Tired* and among the rest. Noteworthy, the three mentioned feelings had a considerably lower frequency of report in the first week of the lockdown with 1.1%, 0.88% and 1.55% for feeling *Overwhelmed*, *Stressed*, and *Anxious*, respectively. The reported average for feeling *Calm* was 3.77%, which although small in percentage, it is promising as the initial report of this emotion was 0% in the week 1 of the lockdown. Figures 1 to 4 represent the answers to questions 2 and 4 of the survey, while Figure 5 presents the answers to question 5. The overall trend over these 8 weeks shows a strong dominance of negative feelings among students (Figure 1). Tiredness, or fatigue, is commonly associated to an abnormal reaction of exhaustion in daily activities, and it is maintained by external and internal factors, such as stressful life events and psychophysiological responses including headaches, shortness of breath, and faintness, among others [27]. The literature suggests that for the students this fatigue is related to poor academic performance, absenteeism, and the outcome of restrictions in outdoor activities, developing a sedentary lifestyle and limited social interaction with peers [28]. Moreover, in parents, it can be attributed to the decreased household incomes and the perception of losing control over external factors [29].

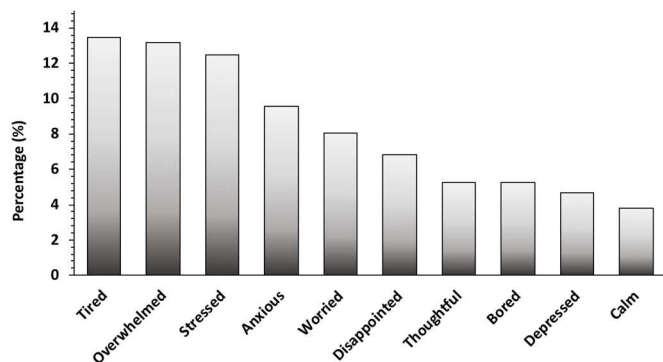


Fig 1. Students' predominant emotions throughout week 2 to week 8 of the lockdown

Comparing the emotions of parents throughout week 2 to week 8 of the lockdown shows an interesting contrast. The 10 most frequently reported emotions of parents evenly span across the positive and negative sides of the spectrum (Figure 2). *Worried* was the most frequently reported feeling among parents (13.57%) followed by feeling *Thankful* (11.12%) and *Optimistic* (9.99%). Remaining *Calm* (9.3%) but equally *Stressed* (9.3%), the parents have undergone through a drastic change in their daily routine. From facilitating the basic needs for the online learning of the children to taking care of the household duties and redistribution of the tasks and managing finances and even taking care of older members of the family, stress was an inevitable byproduct of the COVID-19 pandemic for students' parents [30].

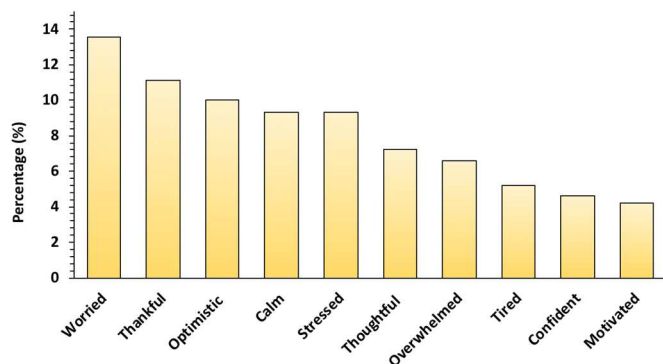


Figure 2. Parents' predominant emotions throughout week 2 to week 8 of the lockdown

Further exploring of the progression of the three most frequently reported feelings during the length of this study demonstrates a cohesive trend in students' emotions. In general, *Tired* and *Overwhelmed* followed a same pattern of increase or decrease across the 8 weeks of this analysis. One week into life under lockdown (March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020) the rate of tiredness, overwhelm and stress significantly increased among the students. This state of uncertainty and pressure imposed by the sudden transition of the classes to the remote scheme have contributed to the prevalence of such negative feelings among students at different academic levels [31], [32]. We assume a partial confusion might have led to the feeling of overwhelm since other social interactions were still ongoing while the

schooling had taken a rapid pivot of switching to online scheme. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Mexico officially enters a state of health emergency which had led to a strict lockdown across the nation. From week 5 to week 8, the reports of *Stressed* followed a gradual but persistent increase in its frequency of reports, pertaining to the effect of sustained exposure to the stressors that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon an announcement on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020, which indicated that the entire semester will be carried out remotely feeling of being *Tired* and *Overwhelmed* have naturally surged among students who were in anticipation of returning to their normal schooling setup. Decreased levels of life satisfaction was observed among students when schools transitioned to distance learning [33], [34]. Studying over distance made group collaboration among students limited, which affected their ability to learn and interact with their classmates. Remaining within the social academic environment is crucial for the students and it is highly important to reduce distractions, increase productivity and motivation, and lessen anxiety [35].

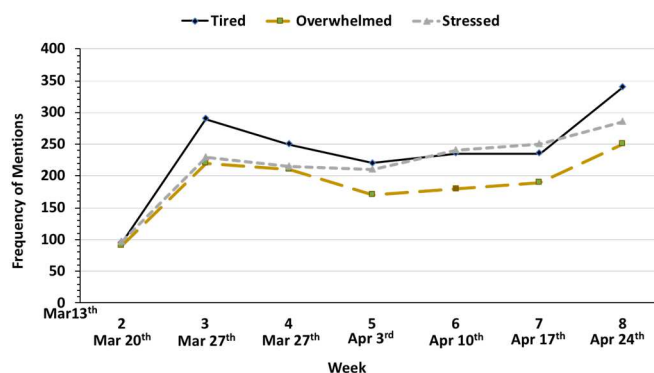


Figure 3. Development of the three most predominant feelings of the students throughout week 2 to week 8

The progression of the three predominant feelings of the parents took a chaotic turn. Upon entering the lockdown, parents present an increased level of worry and thankfulness although the optimism has undergone a gradual decline throughout the week (March 20 to March 27). As the time under lockdown progressed, the sense of worry subsided among the parents although thankfulness and optimism underwent a grand turbulence which is rather hard to explain. This lability in the emotional state of the parents could stem from inconsistent emotional regulation which may, in turn, impact their emotional intelligence [36]. Parental emotional intelligence results in children's expressions of positive emotions, as well as their increased social competence and adjustment [37], and the lack of it directly influences children's emotions leading them towards more negative feelings [38]. The feeling of being *Worried* began to surge one week prior to the announcement of the remote semester however becomes almost linear after the announcement that the students will continue with online learning for the rest of spring semester. These findings are in line with previous reports of the literature which demonstrate parents' emotional state may also lean towards more negative states with the instauration of homeschooling and remote learning models [25]–[27].

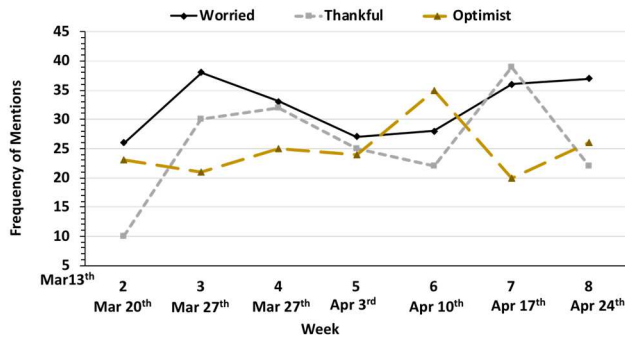


Figure 4. Development of the three most predominant feelings of the parents throughout week 2 to week 8.

Regarding the emotional valence of both groups, Figure 5 represents a comparison. While the data obtained from the students' responses presents a strong inclination towards a negative valence (very unpleasant or unpleasant), parents, in this case, have shown a more balanced and positive emotional state. The parents mostly reported unpleasant or pleasant as their perceived emotional valence for their most predominant feeling.

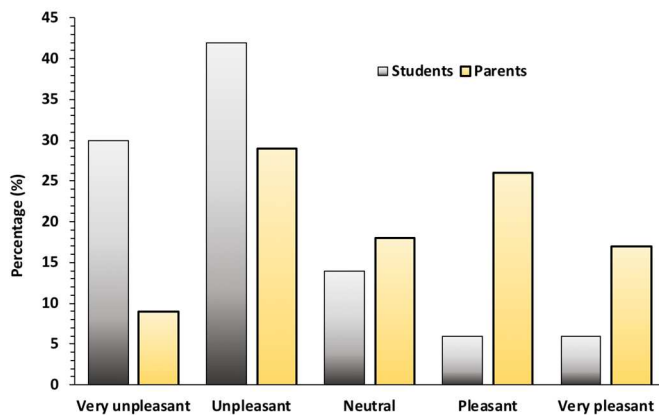


Figure 5. The emotional valence of the most dominant feeling perceived by students and parents throughout week 2 to week 8

As the time of uncertainty progresses, the likelihood of increased negative feelings among students and parents can grow proportionally. Researchers suggest that negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic spans beyond the time of this international health crisis and to address the profound issues caused by these events require organized efforts from all stakeholders and policymakers across nations. Within higher education environment, we have implemented multiple strategies to assist our community in multiple ways. Below, we summarize some of these strategies as proposed methods for mitigating further detrimental effects.

- Offering timely and adequate updates and information which can result in reduced fear and anxiety

- Raising awareness and expanding the understanding of the community regarding physical and mental considerations through training and workshops
- Providing help lines and psychological assistance to those who face difficulty in managing emotions (e.g. "Queremos" or "We care for You" was one example developed at Tecnológico de Monterrey)
- Creating virtual programs and events for continued hangout and socialization (e.g. "life@home" with over 1200 online activities including game, sport, and art programs was one example developed at Tecnológico de Monterrey)
- Redesigning the teaching and learning process to become more interactive and engaging (e.g. "Buddy Academico" or "Academic Buddy" was one example developed at Tecnológico de Monterrey which has trained professors to rapidly adapt and use new remote and highly flexible technologies for interacting with students)
- Promoting positivity and optimism (e.g. "Cuida Tu Mente" or "Take Care of Your Mind" was one example developed at Tecnológico de Monterrey which has concentrated on sharing positive thoughts, practicing meditation and mindfulness)

## V. CONCLUSION

The pandemic situation in Latin America has imposed radical changes in the way of living and studying, which may cause a difficulty of adaptation and coping with the circumstances for students and their families. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the emotions of university students and their parents during the first eight weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic at the private university Tecnológico de Monterrey in Mexico through a weekly survey. According to the results, it can be concluded that unpleasant emotions prevailed in the students and progressively increased in quantity. On the other hand, parents showed fluctuations of unpleasant and pleasant emotions, which could affect the way their offspring handle theirs. However, the fact that the most predominant emotion of the parents was "worried", indicates that there is a level of concern about the changes that have occurred. Having the initiative to create supportive spaces, as well as counseling services, is important for universities and their leaders, as the crisis has inflicted continuous distress on their students and families.

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