

Transgender student experiences of online education during COVID-19 pandemic era in rural Eastern Cape area of South Africa: A descriptive phenomenological study

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Abstract

COVID-19 affected education in many ways. As a response, various strategies were introduced to ensure students' access to education, including online education. For most of the students, fulltime online education brought diverse challenges. This descriptive phenomenological study explored the experiences of transgender students regarding online education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Buffalo City Metro Municipality, South Africa. Data were collected by means of individual telephonic interviews with eight purposively selected transgender students using the snowballing technique. Data were thematically analysed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis framework for data analysis. The findings indicate that transgender students faced barriers in accessing online education, including (i) limited interaction, (ii) unconducive home environment because of stigmatisation, abuse and disruptions, and (iii) lack of access to the internet owing to the centralisation of internet access points, the unaffordability of data, unstable internet connections and an intermittent electricity supply. The findings further highlighted that transgender students face stigmatisation and abuse which hinder their learning. The situation is exacerbated by a lack of sources of income for transgender students, especially those who must make means for money to buy educational resources such as data for internet connection needed for online classes. Based on the findings, the researchers recommend continuous support for transgender students to ensure their continued engagement in online education, amidst the challenges they face. To this end, educational institutions should ensure that students have alternative means of accessing education so that those from diverse populations, settings and socioeconomic statuses are reached.

Keywords: COVID-19; descriptive phenomenology; online education; transgender students; Rural Eastern Cape

Introduction

This paper reports on transgender students' experiences of online education during COVID-19 Era in rural areas of the Eastern Cape. When Coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) hit global communities in 2020, the world was thrust into turmoil and had to deal with various types of change. Chief of these were the restrictions that had to be imposed as countries went into lockdown. South Africa was not immune to these changes. On 23 March 2020, the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced that the country's lockdown would begin on 26 March 2020 (SANews, 2020). The lockdown protocols detailed various measures to curb the spread of the virus, including the restrictions imposed on the movement of and contact between individuals. The pandemic and its concomitant restrictions, therefore, meant that various sectors of society had to find different ways of carrying on with their lives. Educational institutions, then, as one of the main areas where gatherings are mandated, frequent and prolonged, were generally affected. They consequently had to find innovative ways to ensure that students, of various kinds and from various backgrounds, continued to have access to education (Daniel, 2020; Dube, 2020). One such was online education implemented by most of the institutions of higher education in South Africa, regardless of students' socioeconomic environment. Therefore, it was important for the researchers to explore the experiences of transgender students in the rural area of Eastern Cape towards online education, especially because of the community's attitudes associated with this population.

Literature review

COVID-19 affected education globally (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina & Bruce, 2020). The result of the various restrictions meant that students and teachers could not have face-to-face contact in class owing to restrictions on gatherings. As a response, educational institutions have been seeking innovative alternatives to ameliorate the effects of the disruptions. To this end, a quick Google Scholar search of recent literature indicates how "throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a growing reliance on the use of technology to learn, live, and stay connected" (Goldschmidt, 2020). What comes out prominently, though, is how technology is touted as an enabler for access to education during lockdown restrictions. Technology can widen access, increase flexibility and reduce the need for on-site teaching accommodation (Kumar, Saxena & Baber, 2021; Dube, 2020; Subedi & Subedi, 2020). It stands to reason, then, that technology platforms have been the platforms of choice for education under constraints.

In other words, technology has provided access to education for students who would otherwise have had to miss out. "In education, the term access typically refers to the ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure – or at least strive to ensure – that students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education" (EdGlossary, 2014). At the core of access, then, is the issue of student support, in that institutions should strive to ensure learning opportunities for students. Student support, in this regard, refers to institutional (administrative and policy), cognitive (quality content and efficient pedagogy) and affective (coping strategies, mental wellness and conducive learning environments) strategies (Williams, McIntosh & Russell, 2021; Mailizar et al., 2020). Student support, therefore, is the foundation and defining character of access, as aptly argued by Williams et al., (2021) and Waters and Hensley (2020) who stated that access to learning is anchored on student technological support and use of various opportunities available and preferred by students. The

versatility of technology, then, provides the access and support so that students can have opportunities for successful learning. What is key, though, is that such opportunities should be equitable and equal (EdGlossary, 2014).

While the benefits of technology cannot be disputed, it remains to be seen if technology in education is “an infallible means to develop profound knowledge and wide range of language skills” (Ahmad, 2016: 118), particularly in relation to students who might be regarded as those on the periphery. There remains a dearth of research on, for example, the role of technology in relation to providing access to education for transgender students, particularly in the time of COVID-19. Even outside the pandemic era, transgender students have often been left out of discussions and decisions regarding access to education, even though they face various adversities and impediments to accessing education (Omercajic & Wayne, 2020). Scholars argue that issues of access to education for transgender students are issues of equity and social justice (Omercajic & Wayne, 2020). According to Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG, 2004), transgender people are “those whose gender identity or gender expression differs from conventional expectations for their physical sex”. They face a myriad of challenges because they are different and their behaviour and expression of self, differs from what society expects or associates with that gender (Enke, 2016). According to Goldberg (2018), “many transgender students experience discrimination and harassment at college, which may have implications for their academic success and retention”. In fact, the negative experiences of transgender students are sometimes described as hostile (Omercajic & Wayne, 2020; Wayne, Kassen & Omercajic, 2020; Daniels et al., 2019). In addition to societal attitudes, transgender populations face adverse conditions such as poverty (Kia, Robinson, MacKay & Ross, 2020; Suissa & Sullivan, 2021).

In view of this literature review, considering the experiences of transgender students of transphobic discrimination, bullying, poverty, transgender students still have to access online education like all other students during COVID-19 lockdown, this paper asks the following question: *What might be the transgender students’ experiences of online education during COVID-19 Era in rural areas of the Eastern Cape?* Thus, this study explores transgender students’ experiences of online education during COVID-19 Era in rural areas of the Eastern Cape.

Theoretical framework.

Perhaps the most relevant theoretical framework for exploring access is one that describes what the access to education entails – interaction. According to Moore (1989), a successful teaching and learning environment involves bi-directional interaction of various kinds. In view of the remote learning that has been associated with the pandemic restrictions, interaction theory, as encapsulated in the theory of transactional distance, is a worthwhile lens because it refers to “the universe of teacher-learner relationships that exist when students and instructors are separated by space and/or by time” (Moore, 1993). In this case, when one considers technology as a solution to transgender students’ access to education, one must consider Moore’s (1989) argument for student–student, student–teacher and student–content interaction. It should be noted that human–human interaction is not merely for the purposes of socialising, or an affective outlet, but is meant for cognitive activities such as discussions, explanations, cognitive exchanges, argumentation and the negotiation of meaning (Kumar et al., 2021; Saxena, Baber & Kumar, 2020). In addition to human–human interaction, one needs

to consider the fact that students interact with course content and assessment through technology (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). This means that access to education must also explore transgender students' educational experiences in relation to these types of interaction. Such access should also be considered based on the availability of technological resources for successful education (Williams et al., 2021). There is thus room to explore whether technology provides an enabling or disabling environment for the transgender students' access to education.

Method

Design

This study employed descriptive phenomenology to describe experiences of transgender students regarding online education during the COVID-19 lockdown. According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), phenomenological research is concerned with the essence of the participants' meaning through its iterative nature. The researchers used descriptive phenomenology because it was deemed a suitable design to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of transgender students by digging deeper into their real-life world (Sloan & Bowe, 2014) when accessing online education during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. This is because, according to Husserl, reality cannot be studied separately from the consciousness of those experiencing it (Morrow, Rodriguez & King, 2015).

Setting, population and sample

The study was conducted at the Buffalo City Metro Municipality of the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The municipality had experienced high rates of COVID-19 infections and death rates during the second wave of the COVID-19 resurgence in South Africa. Participants were recruited using snowballing technique. To ensure homogeneity of the sample, the study inclusion criteria were participants who were 18 years and older; resided in the Buffalo City Metro Municipality for at least two years; who identified themselves as a transgender woman, or have been assigned male sex at birth and currently living as a woman, and have registered as a student before 2020, and still registered for current academic year (being at the higher education for at least two years). The recruitment process was initiated through the link of one transgender woman who met the inclusion criteria. The women provided the fourth author who was responsible for recruiting the participants and collecting data the cellphone numbers of other potential participants. The total sample size was eight transgender women. The number was determined by data saturation. As Kincheloe (2005) asserted, quality findings in qualitative research are not determined by number of participants but depth and prolonged engagement with the researched. Table 1 presents the participants' biographical data. The names used for the participants are pseudonyms which were given in order to protect their identity.

Table 1. Biographical data of participants

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Level of study</i>	<i>Gender identity disclosure at home</i>
Rudo	25	Psychology	3 rd	Not disclosed
Thoby	23	Education	4 th	Not disclosed
Bessy	23	Education	3 rd	Disclosed
Nana	25	Social Work	3 rd	Disclosed
Belinda	22	Information Technology	4 th	Disclosed
Fanisa	23	Social Work	3 rd	Disclosed
Oniah	24	Psychology	3 rd	Disclosed
Metsi	25	Microbiology	3 rd	Disclosed,

Ethical considerations

To conduct this study, an ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa’s (UNISA) Department of Health Studies Research Ethics Committee. Each participant informed about all the ethical related issues were provided to enable them to make verbal consent as the study was conducted at the height of global COVID-19 pandemic where South Africa was not spared. Furthermore, the study aims, objectives, and the process of data collection to the participants were explained to participants. Ethical principles such as the right to privacy and confidentiality, right to withdraw anytime during the study were explained to the participants (Flick, 2018). To minimise harm, which for this study was mostly the spread or contracting COVID-19 for both the researched and the researcher, the researcher ensured that special precautionary measures were followed by conducting telephonic interviews than physical meetings (Flick, 2018; Gray, Grove, & Sutherland, 2017; South African Government 2020).

Data collection instrument

These interviews were guided by an interview guide drafted by the researchers. Before actual data collection, the interview guide was tested through interviewing two transgender women who are not part of the sample. This was done to ensure that the questions are clear and that the language used is not discriminative, judgmental or sensitive as the transgender women are among the vulnerable population. After first pilot interview, the audio recording was listened to by all authors, and discussed the process, cautioning against using leading and closed ended questions which can affect the reflective and descriptive nature of the study. After the comments, second test interview was conducted, and discussion made. All the researchers were satisfied with the process followed during second interview and the probes used. The interview guide was then finalised.

Data collection

The researcher conducted individual in-depth telephonic interviews from volunteering transgender students guided by the final interview guide. All interviews were digitally audio recorded. The following free attitude open-ended question was posed to each participant to initiate the discussion. *“Kindly share with me your experiences of online education during COVID-19 pandemic.”* The initial question was then followed by further probes to explore further the single response given by the participants. This was to allow the researcher to

exhaust all possible areas in the description of the participants' experiences. The following were some of the probes used: What is your view about technology teaching? What did you like most about that? The researcher asked further probing questions such as: How did it affect you as an individual? What could be the best solution? Probing was to ensure that the hidden experiences are carefully mined out from participants as the experiential experts of the experiences and the essence of meaning of their experiences is unearthed (Flick, 2018; Morrow et al., 2015). Probing was blended with continuous reflections between the researchers and the researched to explore contextual meaning of the item picked for reflection. Through the reflections, the researcher ensured rich engagement to dig deeper the meaning-making of the participants' experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Though the researcher could not observe the non-verbal cues such as body language, the researcher made field notes recording aspects such as tone of voice and silence during the interviews (Preethi, 2019). Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. At the end of every interview, the researcher marked all the different recordings with a participant number. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached (Gray et al., 2017).

Data analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim by first author to promote the voice of the participants (Castillo, 2018; Peat, Rodriguez & Smith, 2019). Two of the researchers individually analyzed the data guided by the steps of interpretative phenomenological analysis framework for data analysis as follows: The step-by-step approach involved reading and rereading followed by noting of common themes through circling to ensure emersion with data. Thereafter, the researcher matched emergent themes with field notes per individual case. A connection between emergent themes was sought. The researcher ensured a continuous reflective process before moving to the next step while seeking for similar patterns across all cases. The last step involved peer critiquing by other researchers together with consulting available literature to compare findings with participants' verbatim quotes for a coherent analytical account of the whole process. Finally, a table was created to summarise superordinate themes, sub-themes, and themes of the findings as indicated below in Table 2:

Results

Based on the analysis of the participants' description of their experiences, two superordinate themes, composed of several themes and subthemes, namely, psychosocial environment and limited interaction, emerged from the data analysis, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: *Experiences of transgender students regarding online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 lockdown*

Superordinate themes	Themes	Sub-themes
Unconducive psychosocial environment	<i>Stigmatisation</i>	<i>Stigmatisation by parents</i>
		<i>Name-calling by extended family members</i>
	<i>Exposure to abuse</i>	<i>Sexual abuse by stepparents</i>
		<i>Abuse by partner</i>
	<i>Disruptions</i>	<i>Noise</i>
		<i>Involvement in household chores</i>
	<i>Internet-related challenges</i>	<i>Centralised internet</i>
		<i>Unaffordability of data</i>
		<i>Intermittent electricity supply</i>
	Limited interaction	<i>Lack of opportunity to interact with classmates</i>
<i>Immediate disconnection to save data</i>		
<i>No time to interact with lecturers</i>		<i>Pre-recorded issue</i>
		<i>Sparing the data for the next lesson</i>

Unconducive psychosocial environment

This superordinate theme highlights the psychosocial environment in which transgender students found themselves during the COVID-19 lockdown. It is composed of three themes: stigmatisation, exposure to abuse and disruptions.

Stigmatisation

This theme relates to the stigmatisation faced by transgender women while they were at home under lockdown:

At home, my parents used to know me as a straight boy. But, since I left home to go to the university, I have realised that I am a transwoman and have to live as such. However, at home, the moment they saw me putting on my makeup, my father mentioned that, he has only one wife and a son, not a girl and request me to urgently wipe off the nonsense from my face. This make me so uncomfortable and disturbed my concentration during online lessons (Rudo).

Besides stigmatisation by parents, transgender women are also stigmatised by other extended family members:

Because I was on campus, I have bought a new wardrobe to dress comfortably. Now I no longer have any male clothes. As I have not disclosed my gender identity, every time

my cousins see me dressing up, they call me names like, sister, queen and mammy. I cannot even dress up without being laughed at But this traumatised me making me to be unable to concentrate with my school work, unlike when I am on campus where I dress freely without being stigmatised. In fact, on campus they are used to me. It is not even an issue of how I dress because we are so many (Thoby).

Apart from the stigmatisation experienced in the home environment, which affect transgender students' concentration, participants also reported the issue of abuse.

Exposure to abuse

This theme focuses on the abuse experienced by transgender women because of being at home and being expected to attend online classes. The transgender students complained of different forms of abuse. One of the participants mentioned the abuse she experienced from a stepparent:

Since I passed Grade 12, and joined the university, at least I was away from my stepfather. Even during holidays, I did not go home but remain in the hostel, or visit a friend. But now, with Covid-19 and online education, I was forced to come back home. My stepfather continues to molest me. The problem is that I do not want to make a scene, because my mother loves him, and she is at least happy for the first time in her life, after she was physically abused by my biological father because of my gender identity. But I know that, as soon as my mother leaves home, he will sexually abuse me. I cannot concentrate when I study as I know that, anytime he can come and drag me to his room and force himself on me (Belinda).

The abuse experienced comes not only from parents but also from sexual partners, as highlighted in the following excerpt:

When I left secondary school, I started to live openly as a transwoman. My parents became aware when my sister show them my picture and they said that I should not come home, as they have given birth to a "boy", so they do not want to see me anyhow. I therefore had to move in with my boyfriend, who is a gay. He is very abusive. He expected me to do what he wants in his own time although I had to join the online class. I have missed several virtual classes. I do not think that I will pass (Nana).

Besides the abuse, there are disruptions in the home environment which hinder transgender women from fully participating in online education.

Disruptions

This theme highlights the disruptions experienced by transgender women when trying to engage in online education at home. The disruptions include noise in the environment and expectations to carry out household chores.

One of the participants highlighted the inability to concentrate on online classes due to noise, as indicated in the following quotation:

My uncle likes very loud music. I cannot even tell him to reduce the volume as it is his home. I therefore try to study but cannot concentrate. I cannot join the classes due to loud noise (Bessy).

The noise emanates not only from the home but also from the neighbourhood:

As most of the people are at home, my neighbours play loud music from morning up to sunset. This is so disturbing. I wish we could be allowed to go back to the university. We shall do the lockdown in the hostel, because online classes at home are not even feasible. Unfortunate I cannot even tell anyone to keep quiet as a transgender person, we are voiceless in rural community. Any irritation to the community may be calling death to myself (Belinda).

In addition to the noise that hinders transgender women, some of the participants were expected to help out with the household chores:

Nobody understand that I am at school. They expect me to do the house chores daily. I must cook, clean the house and do laundry. If there is shortage of something, they will send me to town to buy. When they need electricity, they send me. When I tell them that I am supposed to be in class they do not understand. They assume that I just want to be playing with my laptop. I end up cooking while my laptop is on (Fanisa).

Besides disruptions at home caused by noise or involvement in household chores, participants raised the issue of internet access as a particular hindrance to online education by transgender women.

Internet-related challenges

This superordinate theme focuses on the issues related to internet which influence the accessibility of transgender women access to online education. Results indicate that transgender women face diverse challenges related to internet access. The challenges range from the internet only being accessible in a centralised place, the unaffordability of data and unstable internet connections.

Centralised internet

Access to the network is a problem for some of the transgender students. This is due to a lack of network access in certain areas, as shown by the following statement:

When I at home, because it is in rural village, I cannot access internet. For me to get the internet access, I am expected to go to the shopping mall. But this is impossible due to lockdown. And even when I am at the shopping mall, I can only download tutorials and save. I cannot join the classes due to noise. I cannot even write examination at the mall (Rudo).

Besides the issues relating to localisation of internet in certain areas, some participants cannot even afford to buy data for accessing the internet.

Unaffordability of Wi-Fi data

Being at home is an issue for some of the participants as they do not have money to buy data. This is compounded by the problem of a lack of money-making opportunities due to the COVID-19 lockdown:

When I am at school I do not have a problem of accessing data. The university give us a bit of data, which cannot even last for a week. This means that I should go and buy data.

But I do not have money. Because of lockdown and fear of Covid-19 infection, I cannot even hassle. Before Covid-19 pandemic, I could do the household chores for other people and get paid. Sometimes I would exchange sex for money and can buy data and whatever I need. But now I am stuck. I do not have any plan. I am missing a lot at school (Belinda).

Besides the unaffordability of data, there is the challenge of the instability of the internet connection.

Unstable internet

Fortunately, I have Wi-Fi network, but the quality is not good. Most of the time it is difficult to hear what the lecturer is saying. Sometimes I get disconnected in the middle of session (Oniah).

Unstable internet is also related to an intermittent electricity supply.

Intermittent electricity supply

Participants mentioned that they sometimes fail to access the internet due to a lack of continuity in the electricity supply which is mostly in the form of intermittent load shedding:

The online test and examination are challenging. We need to adjust. With the network, we get frustrated because of load shedding. If I fail to finish due to network, I must write another test, which becomes very unfair (Fanisa).

Load shedding not only affects internet access, but some student cannot even start their computers due to lack of power:

There is load shedding most of the time. When there is load shedding, the network also disappears. I end up failing to connect. So, I usually miss lessons. Sometimes we spend more than 24 hours without internet and even electricity. This means that you cannot even study. Load shedding is rare while we are on campus because there is even backup of electricity in the form of generators (Metsi).

Besides the internet-related challenges, participants also raised the issues of limited interaction.

Limited interaction

This superordinate theme focuses on the limited interaction inherent to online education. Participants raised concerns that online education limits their interaction. The interaction highlighted refers to interaction with fellow students and with the lecturers.

Inability to interact with fellow students

Participants mentioned that online education hinders them from interacting with fellow students. One the reasons for not interacting with other students is that after formal lectures, their classmates leave the virtual space.

We fail to discuss the content because there is no proper interaction with colleagues. Immediately after the online session, everybody leave the online platform. Unlike with the face-to-face lecture where when the educator leaves the class, we remain discussing until our next class start. We can even go to the student centres, or our

residential areas and continue with the discussions. But now, such an opportunity is not there (Rudo).

Participants further mentioned that interaction online is also determined by data affordability as shown by the following statement:

Sometimes people might have an opportunity of joining the discussion groups organised by one of the student in class. But because we want to spare data as much as possible, we do not join such discussions so that we can be able to attend the formal classes. With this online system, you find that data can be exhausted quickly (Belinda).

Besides trying to spare data, some participants feel uncomfortable about initiating online communication with students they do not know:

The problem for online thing is that you cannot ask anyone as you do not know the people. It is better to be taught physically in class. Online learning without knowing people is difficult as we do not even know their attitudes towards us transgender people. (Musi)

Apart from the failure to discuss with the fellow classmates, participants could not interact freely with the lecturer for clarification.

Limited time to interact with the lecturer

This theme focuses on the participants' inability to interact with the lecturer. Failure to interact was due to pre-recorded presentations and data-related issues. The participants mentioned that most of the lessons are pre-recorded:

The lessons are pre-recorded making it difficult to ask the question or interrupt the lecturer during the lesson. This is a problem because, sometimes the whole lesson ends without me understanding anything. It is very difficult to ask the questions directly just using chat (Rudo).

In other instances, the student failed to interact because of the types of platform used:

Most of the time during online lessons, it is only the facilitator's platform which is active, we cannot interrupt if there is something you do not understand. For you to be given chance, is at the end of the lesson where the facilitators link controller can unmute your mike, but the time is limited, because some platforms just close when the scheduled lesson time is over (Thoby).

In addition to the way in which lessons are provided, participants also referred to data as a challenge to continue interacting with the lecturer when the formal lesson is over.

We would like to interact and ask more questions to the facilitators after the formal lesson. But when one think of the data, we just disconnect. Otherwise data will get depleted before the next lesson (Metsi).

Discussion

The advent of COVID-19 seems to have intensified the psychosocial challenges that transgender students had been going through prior to the pandemic. These challenges related mainly to

unconducive home environments where stigmatisation, abuse and disruptions were experienced.

The findings have indicated that the psychosocial environment where the transgender women find themselves in, especially during lockdown, is not conducive for them to attend online education. The environment includes their homes. Participants mention that, when they are on campus, it was easier for them to live freely and openly as transgender. But because of lockdown, participants live under pressure because their parents forced them to act as a “straight individual”. This situation affects the transgender women psychologically, as they are traumatized, making them to fail to concentrate during online education. The study findings indicate that, though online education is one of the innovative ways to ensure that students continue to have access to education as stated by Daniel (2020) and Dube (2020), the situation was different for transgender students in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape, South Africa during COVID-19 lockdown.

Furthermore, for transgender women, going back to their home environment exposes them to sexual abuse, which they have previously averted by being on campus. But currently, being back at home makes them to be abused by people such as their step fathers. Having to suffer such sexual abuse, it affected their concentration during the online education. The challenge is wanting to put other’s happiness first, as person like Belinda chose to suffer in silence in order to protect her mother’s relationship. The situation prohibits her from concentrating to the studies. These findings attest to Enke (2016), Omercajic and Wayne (2020), Wayne et al. (2020), mentioning that transgender students experience diverse challenges including discrimination, harassment and other hostile treatments. Furthermore, such decision to stay in the abusive relations aligns with findings by Hentschel, Heilman and Peus (2019) that transgender women are less assertive than male counterparts.

As some transgender women were living openly on campus, but “pretending to be cisgender men” at home, going back home makes them to be “outed” by some of their relatives who have seen them such as siblings. The situation caused people like Nana to be disowned by the parents because of gender identity. That compelled her to move out and go and stay with the sexual partner. Unfortunately, the sexual partner was also abusive, not allowing her to join online classes. That made her to miss several online classes.

Apart from direct emotional and sexual abuse experienced by some of the transgender women which negatively affected their engagement to online education, findings indicate that there was noise in the environment. The noise was either from loud volume of music from home which they have no control of or from neighbours. People like Bessy and Belinda failed to concentrate during the online classes because of loud music played at home and also by neighbours. Due to voicelessness of transgender women because of fear of stigma and discrimination based on how the gender nonconforming individuals are viewed in the community, transgender women could not request relatives or neighbours to lower their volume. While these challenges are also generally experienced by employees working from home (Palumbo, 2020) and other students (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Dube, 2020, Daniels et al., 2019), the transgender students’ plight was particularly hard because of the existing tensions related to the stigma of their sexuality. For example, when the transgender students were disturbed by noise in their homes, they had few places to escape to since most faced hostility

from their neighbours and communities. This meant that no matter how much their concentration levels were disturbed, lockdown meant that they were locked down to their homes without the many alternatives they would have had outside the pandemic. The reluctance of transgender students to confront relatives and neighbours due to fear of stigma and discrimination attest to findings by Enke, (2016) mentioning that transgender individuals face a lot of challenges based on how they behave or express themselves which is contrary to what society expects from a specific gender.

Besides being disturbed by noise, people at home expected transgender women to be involved also on the house chores such as cooking, cleaning the house and also running all the family errands like shopping. People at home did not understand that students can attend school at home. They consider non-involvement to home chores while a person has not gone to class as laziness. This situation prohibited transgender women from being engaged fully to online education. In addition, the fact that the participants were required to stop participating in online classes so that they could attend to household chores meant added stress. This was mainly due to the mostly African perspective where certain household chores are gendered. Because transgender students are different and express themselves differently from the expectations of society in relation to specific genders (Enke, 2016), they had to deal with the double challenge of missing classes and conforming to expectations that did not speak to what they wanted to do. Such behavior of conforming to societal expectations concurs with findings by Hentschel, et al., (2019) that transgender women are less assertive and have poor leadership skills. The situation of forcing all the students to go home during COVID-19 lockdown, and initiating online education without considering the environmental factors of students such as transgender and other marginalized students showed limitation on the part of universities to provide adequate support to students as according to Williams et al., (2021) and Mailizar et al., (2020), student support also include ensuring conducive learning environments for the students.

Another major environmental factor which affected transgender women from benefiting from online education, is the challenges related to technical issues. The technical challenges in this study relate to the affordability and availability of the internet as well as the intermittent availability of electricity due to load shedding (a system by the South African power utility where electricity is cut at intermittent intervals to lessen the load or demand for the dwindling power supply). Participants raised the issue of being unable to access internet, as the area where they stay, there is no internet. Internet access is only found in the centralised place such as shopping complex. This means that, for transgender women to be able to access online education, they have to go to the nearby malls. However, because of lockdown regulations, they cannot go to the mall to access class or even to download educational materials. That situation also makes students such as Rudo, who stays in the internet-less area to even fail to write the examination as it was supposed to be conducted online. Failure to stay connected to internet defeats the requirement of online education which requires students to stay connected in order to learn as indicated by Goldschmidt (2020).

In some instances, the challenge was not the unavailability of internet, but the price of data which students could not afford due to lack of money. The lack of money became the issue for transgender women like Belinda, whose source of income was piece job where she would go

to people's houses to assist them with laundry and other household chores so that she can get paid. The other source of her income was transactional sex, where she would provide sexual services to clients in order to get money. Because of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, she could not go to places like brothels, restaurants, shebeens or any places where she can find the clients. The situation hinders her from accessing the online education as she cannot afford to buy data. The lack of financial resources by transgender students attest to the finding by Kia et al., (2020) and Suissa and Sullivan, (2021) indicating that transgender populations face adverse conditions such as poverty.

For other transgender women, the challenge was not affordability of data, but the issue was that the internet connectivity was unstable, thus, hindering them from joining the online classes. Even when sometimes they manage to connect, poor quality of network prohibits them from hearing what is said in the class, or continually disconnected. This situation makes them not to benefit from online education. The situation of not having data to access education indicates that the institutions of higher education, though they initiated online education, did not provide the necessary tools for marginalised and economically disadvantaged students to access education. Not providing data is in contrast with the recommendation by Williams et al., (2021) and Waters and Hensley (2020) who stated that access to learning is anchored on student technological support and use of various opportunities available and preferred by students.

The unstable internet was exacerbated by intermittent supply of electricity. Transgender women mention that they failed to join online classes due to electricity load shedding. This is the situation where the electricity will be switched off for at least two hours or even up to 24 hours in some areas as the country's means of rationing electricity supply. During load shedding, the internet is also affected, which blocks the students from joining online classes. This is the situation which, when students are on campus, they rarely experience. This situation means that they fail to connect to internet. They could also not read the downloaded materials as for most of the laptops used by students, the batteries can last only for four hours if not connected to the electricity source.

While lack of data and poor internet connectivity are challenges which ultimately cause uncertainty for virtual learning for many students in South Africa (Dube, 2020), the transgender students in this study were particularly affected because they face adverse conditions and poverty (Kia et al., 2020; Daniels et al; 2019), which affected their ability to afford data to enable them to participate in online activities such as completing assessment tasks. To this end, the participants noted that if they had been on campus, their studies would not have been affected by data and electricity limitations. This does not negate the literature which exposes the discrimination and harassment that these students face on campuses (Goldberg, 2018), but it seems campuses offer more learning opportunities without the restrictions of technology.

While the uncondusive psychosocial environment and technical challenges were expressed emphatically in this study, it became clear that at the core of the struggles with online learning for transgender students was a crucial gap in interaction in its various facets. The lockdown regulations prohibited the students from interacting in person for discussions with lecturers and other students, towards understanding the content. Participants raised the challenge inherent to how online education is structured such as limited interaction with fellow students.

This is because of immediate disconnecting from virtual space as soon as the lecturer finished the presentation. This is different from what they used to do following face to face learning, where after formal lesson, students will remain interacting with each other, and even take discussions further in the student learning centres. The follow-up discussion made the participants to seek clarification and also more information regarding the lessons. But now, as all students want to conserve data for future lessons, there is no time to remain online and form discussion groups. Lack of the interaction with educators and fellow-students denies the students from benefiting from the human–human interaction, which according to the theoretical framework used in this study, is important not only for socialising and affective outlet, but also meant for cognitive activities such as discussions, explanations, cognitive exchanges, argumentation and the negotiation of meaning (Kumar et al., 2021; Saxena, Baber & Kumar, 2020).

The other challenge is that participants do not have time to know each other, making it difficult to identify the person they can contact for further discussions. They cannot just blindly contact any person based on attendance list as they are not sure of the person’s attitudes towards transgender due to fear of being victimised or exposed to violence. The situation of transgender students’ reluctance to engage in group discussion is not unique to the COVID era, but concurs with Omercajic and Wayne (2020) documenting that transgender students are usually excluded from discussions and decisions regarding access to education.

Some of the lessons are pre-recorded, making it difficult for the students to interject during the lesson to ask questions. This means that, if the learner fails to understand specific aspects in the beginning of the lecture, it can affect the understanding of the entire lesson. Which is not there while students are in physical class as they can raise their hands and ask for clarification immediately. This is in contrast with Moore (1989), mentioning that successful teaching and learning environment involves bi-directional interaction of various kinds. It also contravenes interaction theory, as encapsulated in the theory of transactional distance (Moore, 1993).

The other hinderance to interaction during online education is the type of platforms utilised where only the lecturer’s platform is active during online teaching while all the attendees are muted. This disables participants from interacting with the facilitators. The only time the link controller unmutes the participants is towards the end of the lesson, when there is limited time to interact because those platforms automatically close when the scheduled lesson time is over. Therefore, these findings where students fail to fully access education based on the platforms used and saving data are in contrast with the assertion by Kumar, Saxena, and Baber (2021) and Dube (2020) that the use of online education increases flexibility and access to education. In this study, transgender women prefer onsite physical teaching unlike what is recommended by Kumar et al. (2021) and Dube (2020) mentioning that the use of technology can reduce the need for onsite teaching.

It stands to reason, then, that technology platforms have been the platforms of choice for education under constraints. However, the issue of trying to save data also affects the continuous interaction during online teaching as students disconnect as soon as the formal presentation is over, so that they can still have data for the next session. All the above situations make transgender women to continually experience challenges in accessing education.

In other words, lockdown restrictions affected student–student, student–lecturer and student–content interaction (Moore, 1989; 1993). Instead of in-person discussions with lecturers and group discussions with peers, students had to rely on virtual meetings that were limited by time, technology, data and electricity. The transgender students, thus, preferred to attend physical classes, rather than virtual learning. This calls into question, then, the growing “reliance on technology” (Goldschmidt, 2020: 88), assertions of technology as widening access to education (Kumar et al., 2021; Dube, 2020) and the view of technology as “an infallible means to develop profound knowledge and wide range of language skills” (Ahmad, 2016: 91). While these technology affordances are true, it seems there is a need for conscious adjustments that will increase opportunities for bi-directional interaction. This requires creativity on the part of the teachers, institutional support and, probably, government support. What is clear is that technology should be used so that students can have equal and equitable opportunities to education (EdGlossary, 2014). The negative experiences of students regarding online education continuously violate transgender students’ access to education, even when scholars such as Omercajic and Wayne (2020) regard accessing education for transgender an issue of equity and social justice.

Limitations

Because of the COVID-19 lockdown regulations, in-depth interviews were conducted telephonically. This hindered the researchers from observing some of the non-verbal cues which may have assisted in describing and understanding the data. The data collection was also affected by the Wi-Fi network, as sometimes during the interviews the participants were disconnected or became inaudible. Then, when attempting to resume the interview, some participants were no longer available. Owing to telephonic interviews and limited internet access, participants were given information-related research and other ethical aspects verbally to obtain informed consent. Regardless of these limitations, the researchers did everything they could to ensure trustworthiness and adhere to all ethical principles. As this study followed descriptive phenomenology, the researchers suggest a future quantitative study, comparing the transgender students’ view of online education between rural and urban areas to check if online education is not worsening the gap between the urban and rural transgender students.

Conclusion

The issue of online education seems to be a challenge for all the students, especially some of the transgender students during COVID-19 lockdown. Apart from the psychosocial environment where transgender students face stigma and discrimination, some of the challenges faced by these students are not limited to them alone, but appear to apply to other students in similar settings, in particular the issue related to internet access and limited interaction. However, if the situation is not addressed with the main focus on marginalised groups such as transgender students, the access to education for this population could be continuously compromised. This may further lead to the worsening of marginalisation and perpetuating inequality, poverty and further exploitation among transgender individuals and scourge of gender based violence. To avert the above situation, the researchers therefore recommend the following: Relentlessly fighting for the betterment of the education and lives of transgender through increased awareness of the community in relation to transgender individuals to increase the understanding of transgender issues. This might increase the

acceptance of the transgender individual by the family and community members. Regarding internet access, institutions offering online education should ensure that students are provided with adequate data. When there is lockdown, the students could be given the choice to remain on campus if their home environment is not conducive to learning, with measures in place to comply with health requirements.

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