



# Voices of College Students in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Experiences and Reflections on Mental Health and Academic Life

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic presented several challenges for college students in different areas of their lives, with the literature highlighting mental health as a particularly affected dimension. However, students' perceptions of the various dimensions that may influence their mental health and academic life during this pandemic context are not yet fully manifest. To understand the experiences of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic and to analyze the implications of this period on their mental health and academic life, this study was conducted with twenty students from a university campus located in the interior of the state of Rondônia. The interviews were conducted individually, transcribed and analyzed by reflective thematic analysis. From this analysis, three main themes with their own sub-themes were highlighted, which offer an in-depth understanding of the students' perceptions and experiences. The first theme emphasized the understanding of the concept of mental health and experiences of psychological distress, while the second theme addressed students' perceptions of the factors that positively and negatively affect their mental health. Finally, the third theme explored the implications of the pandemic on students' academic, personal, and mental health lives. The results suggest that preventive and intervention measures are essential to promote a healthy, inclusive and welcoming learning environment. This study contributes to understanding the implications of the pandemic on various dimensions of college students' lives and highlights the importance of addressing mental health as an integral aspect of academic life.

**Keyword** Learning environment · Multidimensional aspect · Thematic analysis · Psychological distress · Preventive measures

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the global education sector, especially higher education. As a result, many universities had to interrupt their academic programs and seek alternatives to continue their activities, such as

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distance learning and hybrid models. According to data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2021), this change impacted more than 220 million students worldwide. In Brazil, the health crisis also forced universities to suspend their in-person teaching activities. The Federal University of Rondônia (UNIR), the only public university in the state where this study was conducted, interrupted academic activities for 6 months starting in March 2020. Later, it adopted remote learning as a measure to resume the academic calendar.

This pandemic scenario and sudden changes in the education system have presented negative implications in various dimensions of college students' lives, including mental health, social life, and academic performance (Conceição et al., 2021; Gogoi et al., 2022; Madrigal & Blevins, 2022; Sanchez et al., 2022). As demonstrated by systematic reviews, there has been a decline in the mental health of the university population during the pandemic, evidenced by an increase in anxiety, depression, mood disorders, sedentary behavior, and excessive internet use (Deng et al., 2021; Elharake et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021).

A global study conducted with undergraduates in 21 countries during the COVID-19 era revealed that the majority of Brazilian university students (76%) have suffered some impact on their mental health due to the pandemic. This rate was the highest among all analyzed countries (Chegg.org, 2021). Results from studies exclusively conducted with Brazilian university students indicate that many of them have faced demotivation, difficulties with concentration, sleeping problems, anxiety crises, and other mental health-related conditions (Corrêa et al., 2022; Mansur-Alves et al., 2021).

However, current literature needs to deepen the understanding of students' perspectives on their experiences during the pandemic and how it has affected their academic lives and mental health, especially among subgroups that are more geographically, socially, and economically vulnerable. For locally adapted and effective interventions, it is essential to understand how students perceive the different dimensions that may contribute to their mental health in a pandemic context, encompassing the additional challenges that may arise with the resumption of in-person university activities (Gogoi et al., 2022). In this sense, it is necessary to listen to the students, to access a more complete understanding of their conceptions and experiences.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate the experiences of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic on a border campus. Furthermore, it focuses on understanding how this period has affected mental health and academic life, considering the unique challenges and opportunities faced by this population, including educational inequalities, barriers to access technology and mental health services, and leisure activities. Due to the lack of literature on the reality of these students, this study is relevant for the possibility that the knowledge produced about this situation will serve as support to address other pandemic crisis situations. This study aims to answer the central question of how university students describe their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and what are the implications of this period on their mental health and academic life. The results can contribute to the development of strategies and policies to support

the mental health and well-being of the student body of a university, especially those facing specific challenges, such as those studying in a border region located in Latin America.

## Method

### Study Design

We conducted a qualitative study to understand the experiences of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic and explore the implications of this period on mental health and academic life. We chose to conduct qualitative research as this is a suitable approach to investigate complex and subjective issues. According to Willig (2019), qualitative research is especially useful for understanding people's experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences, requiring a more exploratory approach.

### Participants

The study was conducted with the participation of twenty university students from a campus of the Federal University of Rondônia. To ensure the representativeness of the student community's diversity, we used purposive sampling in the selection. This method allowed the deliberate screening of cases full of informative elements (Patton, 2015), that is, students whose experiences and perspectives had the potential to maximize our understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

In this sense, we sought diversity in the constitution of our sample, referred to as maximum variation (Sandelowski, 1995) or heterogeneity sampling (Fassinger, 2005). Following this strategy, it was possible to include in the sample people with disabilities, transgender men, homosexual individuals, Bolivian immigrants, and students facing a condition of significant economic vulnerability. In this way, we managed to cover a wide and representative range of the student community, contributing to the richness and depth of this study.

The age range of university students varied between 20 and 56 years, with a mean age of 28 years ( $SD=8.9$ ). Regarding self-definition of gender, participants were divided into cisgender women ( $n=10$ ) and cisgender men ( $n=8$ ) or transgender men ( $n=2$ ). Six students had jobs, two of which were municipal public servants and two retired. Almost all participants were pursuing a degree for the first time, while only three of them were taking their second higher education course, most of them being the first in their family to study at a university ( $n=16$ ). In addition, it is worth mentioning that three students interviewed lived in the rural area and one in a different municipality than where the university campus is located. For a better understanding of the demographic characteristics of the participants, Table 1 presents detailed information about the profile of the students included in the sample.

**Table 1** Sociodemographic characteristics of college students

Sociodemographic characteristics	F/M	%/SD
Age	27.8	8.9
Course		
Administration	8	40%
Environmental management	1	5%
Language and Literature	1	5%
Pedagogy	10	50%
Marital status		
Married	6	30%
Single	14	70%
Nationality		
Bolivia	4	20%
Brazil	16	80%
Gender identity		
Cisgender man	8	40%
Cisgender woman	10	50%
Transgender	2	10%
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	14	70%
Homosexual	3	15%
Pansexual	3	15%

## Procedure

The first author conducted twenty semi-structured interviews on the university campus in June 2022, 2 months after the return of in-person classes with sanitary measures in place. The individual interview method was chosen to collect data, as it allows for obtaining more detailed information about the experiences and viewpoints of the participants (Turner, 2010). Due to the complex and delicate nature of issues related to mental health, the interviews were conducted individually. A semi-structured and flexible interview protocol was developed to allow participants to freely express their ideas and experiences. The interviews were conducted in a way that aimed to obtain an in-depth analysis of each participant's perceptions, contributing to the quality of the data.

Of a total of 22 interviews, two were discarded due to audio file problems, preventing transcription. All interviews were recorded in audio format and varied from 49 to 76 min, with an average of 62 min per interview. Field notes were taken regularly throughout the interviews to ensure that reflection was a continuous process.

## Data Analysis Procedure

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) approach, to develop patterns of meaning and experience regarding college students' conceptions. The analysis was grounded in a critical realist understanding, understanding social reality in terms of implicit structures influenced by historical, cultural, and political factors (Madill et al., 2000). We also considered how students construct and give meaning to their experiences and interactions, as proposed by constructivism (Creswell, 2014). Our inductive approach involved searching for underlying meanings in respondents' perspectives and experiences. Through initial semantic analysis, we identified the meanings expressly expressed by participants, and with progressive analysis, we uncovered latent meanings in depth.

To conduct the analysis, we manually transcribed the interviews and created an electronic document with field notes, which we imported into NVivo software, which allowed us to store, locate, and visualize the initial dataset, codes, and themes. We then conducted an initial read-through to note the interpretations of student talk and analytical observations from the individual interviews and related to the data set. The transcripts were read several times, noting ideas and personal reflections throughout the process. The coding process began with the first author assigning relevant codes to the text passages to address the research questions. The codes were grouped in the NVivo program to review at different times and perform readings of the dataset from various perspectives, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). This process was discussed with the second and third authors to outline the developing analysis, and reflections on the propositions formulated from the data interpretations were recorded in a journal.

We raised initial themes by establishing patterns that expressed similarities in the perceptions and experiences of the college students. To aid in understanding the data and structure the themes, we developed mind maps and performed an interactive and mutually influential analysis with the other processes, using quotes to illustrate the participants' central ideas. After interpreting the themes, we reviewed and refined the codes and themes, eliminating redundancies and overlaps. Themes and subthemes were refined, defined, and named by the first author, and then discussed with the second and third authors to enhance reflexivity, deepen interpretation, and ensure that they accurately represented the meaning of the dataset. In addition, the order in which the themes were presented and how they connected and complemented each other were evaluated to ensure appropriateness. During the process of naming the themes, we conducted a definitional analysis to identify the information captured by each theme and to develop an overall narrative of the dataset, allowing for a broader analysis with different perspectives.

## Ethics

This study received ethical approval from the research committees of two higher education institutions, the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of

Rondônia Foundation (CAAE: 53,096,221.1.0000.5300) and the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto (Ref. No. 2021/06-02c). In addition, all participants provided written informed consent before participating in the interviews. Furthermore, measures were taken to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of the college students, such as using pseudonyms and omitting any information that could lead to their identification.

## Results and Discussion

During the analysis process, three themes and six sub-themes were identified and presented in Table 2, which reflect the diverse perceptions and experiences of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the impacts of this context on mental health and academic life.

### Multidimensional Understandings of Mental Health and Psychological Condition

This theme deals with concepts related to mental health and, more specifically, to the psychological condition of the participants. Mental health was understood by many students as the interaction between the mind and the body, both closely related, as Gardenia pointed out: “I compare mental health as if it were normal health, body health, for me, it is the same”. However, for some, a person without mental health is someone who “is sick in the head, someone crazy” (Álvaro). Thus, the theme includes stigmas related to mental health and indications of psychological distress.

Students demonstrated a multifaceted understanding of mental health, emphasizing the link between physical health and emotional well-being. However, there is a set of established meanings with a stigmatized perspective of mental health, influenced by a predominantly religious and reductionist perspective. Chris said that he was a Christian and, because of this, he sought spiritual help in a moment of great mental distress when he had suicidal ideation. At that time, his emotional state was considered a demonic entity. Even though she was unhappy, she said she asked for prayers to get rid of that curse that was attributed to her:

“... She said I had a demon inside me. I told her like this, if you are faithful, if you have faith, you will take this demon out of me. I said to her, but if you don’t get that demon out of me that you talk about, I’ll never go back to her church. No sooner said than done. She prayed and prayed and nothing happened. I was relieved that I didn’t have a demon, but I felt bad because, like, her saying there’s a demon inside me, I felt really bad because of that.”

Different participants mentioned the shame they feel when disclosing that they need mental health care. They feel that they will be devalued, either because the issue is irrelevant to other people or because they feel excluded in the social environment because they require psychological help. For some, having a mental health problem is something to be ashamed of and hide from others, such as “when you say you’re going to the psychologist it seems like you’re ‘throwing’ a monster on top of

**Table 2** Description of themes and subthemes

Theme 1 Multidimensional understandings of mental health and psychological condition	Theme 2 Perceptions about protective and detrimental factors to mental health	Theme 3 Beyond grief: experiencing the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic, personal, and mental health
“A demon within me”: challenging stigmas for complex understandings of mental health “The mind hurts”: living with the pain of the mind as experiences of anxiety and depression	Recognizing behaviors, lifestyles, and practices that promote mental health Challenges to mental health: Prejudice, finances, and interpersonal conflicts	“Another way of studying”: academic challenges during the pandemic Experiencing the consequences: reflections on the economic and emotional effects of the pandemic

the person, unfortunately” (Azalea). It is also presented the idea that the understanding that important people have that their mental health difficulties are exaggerated or not serious enough: “If someone talks, for example, a son comes to his father and says: I think I have depression. The father will say: Oh, that’s bullshit!” (Thor).

The undergraduates with the knowledge of their fields of study, humanities and applied social sciences, seem to face the dilemma of having a more informed conception of their own mental health and, simultaneously, perceiving and validating stereotyped understandings that present a reductionist view of mental health. Especially in the social environment in which they live because the understandings of suffering and care are also constituted by the mode of social organization.

It can be noticed that this view of mental health is still a reality faced today. The study by Masedo et al. (2021) confirms that stigma persists even among health science students, with negative attitudes toward people with mental disorders. The authors concluded that a biomedical understanding of mental disorders can have negative effects on attitudes, while education based on the psychosocial model offers a broader perspective of the person in relation to the diagnosis.

These findings emphasize the need to address stigmatizing perceptions regarding mental health, as the association between mental health and stigmas of madness may prevent people from seeking help and treatment for mental health problems, thus perpetuating psychological distress (Corrêa et al., 2022; Han & Pong, 2015).

### **“The Mind Hurts”: Living with the Pain of the Mind as Experiences of Anxiety and Depression**

Students expressed their feelings and shared their experiences related to symptoms that appear to be associated with anxiety and depression. These accounts highlight the importance of prioritizing students’ mental health to help them deal effectively with challenges that arise, especially during a health crisis. For example, to explain her psychological state, Magnolia said:

“I stay up all night, walking around the house because my mind won’t let me... I can’t sleep, and then in the morning...life, there’s life to take. I can’t, I lie down to sleep and there comes a lot of thoughts... I feel like screaming.”

Gardenia, another student, reported that she had already been to the Psychosocial Care Center (CAPS) in the city and, despite that, she still faces psychological problems and sleeping difficulties, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive approach to mental health to effectively address this problem experienced by many students:

“I know I don’t well, but I don’t know what it is. I don’t sleep, I get very tense, I can’t eat properly, I’m afraid all the time... I used to receive care in the Caps, I felt I was very depressed, I felt very sad, I didn’t sleep at night. It gives me a great anxiety, I start to cry, and I can’t sleep, and then I start to imagine things as if there were people wanting to catch me, kill me, something like that, and then I can’t sleep. I’m sad all day long, and I don’t sleep at night.”



While talking about the indications of psychological distress, students reported experiencing, in addition to sadness, feelings of discouragement, failure, and despair, as well as physical symptoms. When discussing these psychosomatic symptoms, Begonia expresses the feeling that she will not be able to overcome them, despite her efforts to do so.

“Sometimes I get desperate, it seems like I can’t cope, and then I get sick. My stomach hurts all the time, it feels like I’m hungry, but it’s not hunger, it’s a pain that comes. Just today I felt like crying.”

It is also worth mentioning several reports of suicidal behavior, from ideation, attempts, to the consummated suicide of fellow students on campus. The repercussion of the death of a classmate by suicide dramatically affected the class and the academic community of the campus, showing that the effect of an attempted or completed suicide goes beyond the person who faces the suffering, according to Tavares (2013) and extends to family members and other people in social relationships. Therefore, this is a complex issue that requires more than psychological support; it also requires public policies and intervention programs in various dimensions and levels for the prevention of this public health issue.

Magnolia shared a painful experience in which her mental health became so fragile that she even considered suicide. Unfortunately, Magnolia’s story is not an isolated case. According to a study by Demenech et al. (2022), the prevalence of high suicide risk among undergraduate students in Brazil increased from 11.3% to 17.0% in the periods before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“One day I swore to myself, I couldn’t stand it, I thought about committing suicide a million times because my mind hurt. I had no peace, I couldn’t sleep. When I saw that I was like that in the final stage, that I couldn’t stand it, I got up, that day I left, I dropped my kids off at school, and I was ready to end it there”.

Previous studies (Bantjes et al., 2023; Conceição et al., 2021; Deng et al., 2021) have already documented the prevalence of anxiety and depression in this population. In this study, the description of the participants’ psychological condition emphasizes the need to understand the factors that affect mental health and provide adequate support to meet the specific needs of each academic community. Higher education institutions should be aware of these challenges and work in collaboration with mental health professionals to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies, ensuring that students receive the necessary support to face these challenges and improve their academic and personal quality of life.

## **Perceptions about Protective and Detrimental Factors to Mental Health**

This theme focuses on participants’ perceptions regarding factors that positively and negatively influence mental health. Students shared their experiences and observations, providing insights into what benefits or harms them mentally.

## Recognizing Behaviors, Lifestyles, and Practices that Promote Mental Health

To understand what protects mental health, it became evident that students' personal well-being is linked to social interaction and support from their support networks, including family and friends. Many students mentioned the importance of having people to rely on, both to deal with personal issues and to make decisions related to academic and social life.

Some cited examples of how the encouragement of family and friends made a positive "difference" in overcoming difficult times (Amarilis), "strengthens" in overcoming adversity (Azaleia), and provides "joy" (Vicenzo). They said they felt a connection and acceptance, especially from friends, which helped them deal with some difficulties that made them consider dropping out of college. Regarding this, Amarilis, who was holding her 1-month-old daughter, pointed out: "my friends helped me a lot, encouraged me because until last week I was going to drop out of the course."

Although access to a support network, particularly a family network, may be limited for many students, social support has been widely recognized as a protective factor and important for mental health. This idea is reinforced by studies highlighting the relevance of family and social support in the prevention and treatment of mental disorders (Sun et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023).

In addition to social support, some practices, particularly those associated with spirituality and artistic activities, have been identified by students as sources of well-being. For example, Estênio mentioned that spirituality is a way to find inner peace and satisfaction:

"... Feeling good spiritually as well, because I value spiritual matters a lot, partly because I was raised that way, and feeling good, feeling like I'm in a space where I feel welcomed, where I feel the presence of a superior, divine, sacred being...for me, it's very comforting, it makes me feel good."

In this study, participants emphasized that spirituality is an effective strategy for coping with life difficulties, corroborating the literature that recognizes spirituality as a valuable resource for promoting psychological well-being (Monteiro et al., 2020). The spiritual dimension is considered an essential component of health by the World Health Organization (WHO), emphasizing its importance. It is important to note that spirituality is not limited to religiosity but is seen as a personal and subjective experience that can be a source of support for dealing with life adversities. In summary, the results highlight the importance of spirituality as a valuable resource for coping with life challenges among participants, regardless of religious practice. These findings are relevant to mental health education practice in university institutions, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive approach to promoting psychological well-being of students, considering the spiritual dimension.

Another therapeutic resource mentioned by the participants was art, capable of allowing the expression of feelings and thoughts, thus contributing to mental health. Many students, including Camelia, found in painting and drawing a way to deal with the difficulties imposed by the pandemic, in an attempt to stay emotionally healthy: "The contact with the arts in general does me good, I like to draw, write, paint. So,

these things make me feel good, having involvement with the arts, expressing myself in these ways.”

Indeed, empirical studies point to the effectiveness of art as a way to help people express their emotions creatively and develop skills to cope with psychological suffering (Gómez-Restrepo et al., 2022; Hui et al., 2019). Theory and practice also support this conclusion, as demonstrated by the work of the renowned Brazilian psychiatrist Nise da Silveira (1992), who describes art as a shape of universal communication, and used it to help people in psychological distress express their emotions, as well as connect with their creativity and identity. Therefore, art has become a significant tool for the expression and coping strategy for mental disorders. Similarly, in this study, it was found that art can contribute to promoting the well-being of college students. These findings highlight the importance of creative and artistic approaches in education and mental health projects, as these practices allow students to find alternative ways to express their emotions and cope with stress.

The analyses carried out allowed for the consideration of various factors that appear to have a positive influence on the personal well-being of students, including social support, practices related to spirituality, and art. The family support network plays an important role as a source of social support and in the psychosocial development of college students. When the relationship between family members is marked by affection, good communication, respect, and support, the family can act as a protective factor for mental health. However, when there are conflicts, lack of support, and dysfunctional bonds, the family can become a risk factor for psychological health, as later discussed.

### **Challenges to Mental Health: Prejudice, Finances, and Interpersonal Conflicts**

Participants also identified some issues that caused them suffering and mental health problems: (a) prejudice related to disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity; (b) financial difficulties, such as the absence of paid work; (c) conflicts in relationships with family and friends.

Discrimination, experienced in different environments, from family to university, was mentioned as a source of psychological suffering. Chris reports feeling like a burden, excluded, and constantly anxious about how they are and will be treated because of their sexual orientation. These experiences cause sadness and distress:

“I feel like being homosexual makes me excluded from society. Sometimes I feel a little bad because, whether we like it or not, it’s difficult for my parents to accept me. My parents don’t accept me. I feel a certain prejudice from my parents. Sometimes they’re watching something on TV, and they criticize a lot, and I just listen, just listen... and that’s bad for us. So, that worries me a lot, like, it mentally harms me. Sometimes I feel a little suffocated. There were some days recently that I was very bad, psychologically... sometimes being who I am is an extra burden. Sometimes the opportunity to enter the job market is also very impaired because of being homosexual. Like, here, there are three heterosexuals and one homosexual. The three heterosexuals are selected,

and the homosexual is not. That's why many times, our behavior is totally different from what we are, to try to get a job. Because of prejudice.”

In turn, Álvaro, a person with a disability, shared his discomfort of being treated like a child and feeling invisible:

“I want to be treated like a person... a normal person, but people treat me like a baby. They never look at me, never... when they see me, they think I'm a baby, that I have no wisdom, you know? I don't like that, I walk down the street and when they see me, they start talking, what are you doing on the street, baby.”

Financial situation is a risk to mental health perceived by most students, a situation exacerbated by the pandemic, as will be discussed in theme 3. Many said they face socioeconomic difficulties, have no job and depend on financial assistance from relatives to get by. This economic condition is a cause for concern and discouragement for Amarflis:

“My financial situation is complicated. Since I recently became a mother... before that, I survived, I worked as a daily cleaner, it was how I survived. Now I survive on... on the help of family members because I stopped working. So, I feel very sad about this situation, right? Being from a low-income family.”

Several students also said they feel under pressure and distressed about their finances, especially with the responsibility of supporting their family: “financial problems end up affecting us. Since I'm going through financial difficulties, it affects my head, I can't think straight, I can't do anything because something may be missing for the family, at home” (Aquiles). The reports from the study participants serve as evidence that financial situation poses a significant risk to mental health. As such, it is crucial to consider these findings and explore solutions that can improve the financial situation of students. One possible solution is to promote financial independence through policies like student aid programs, which could help facilitate personal and academic growth for college students.

During the pandemic, all students faced obstacles, but it was possible to identify that certain groups were disproportionately affected. Students belonging to gender, sexual, disability, and low-income minorities reported additional challenges regarding mental health. These findings reinforce results from previous studies (Browning et al., 2021; Buizza et al., 2022; Demenech et al., 2022; Sa et al., 2020) that show economically vulnerable and minority people are more likely to suffer from psychological problems. Recent studies (García-Louis et al., 2022; Hoyt et al., 2021) point out that socioeconomic inequalities and gender and sexual discrimination are significant factors that contribute to psychological distress among college students. Discrimination, in particular, was mentioned by the students in this study as a significant cause of mental suffering and can occur in different contexts, generating feelings of exclusion, fear, and anxiety, as well as harming self-esteem and self-image.

Additionally, conflictual relationships with family and friends were mentioned as an indicator of cases that cause mental suffering. Camélia, for example, points to the family environment as a factor that negatively influences her mental health,

since stress and bad mood present at home affect her emotionally. Interpersonal conflicts are also a source of stress, with negative impacts both at the university and at home:

“... The family context is also a problem, when everyone is very stressed out when everyone is not doing well, they take it out on everyone or on me. And then I think that mainly at home is what affects me emotionally the most. Some interpersonal relationships that I have to have with people and dealing with people generate conflicts. And, although I may manage that moment, I don’t deal well internally. So, relationships... interpersonal conflicts both at school, oops! At the university, not at school, and in the family.”

Other students have also highlighted the importance of the family environment in the perception of mental health. For instance, Chris expressed their concern about the lack of support and disrespect from their parents. They stated that they expected love and support from their family, but instead, they feel criticized and disrespected, which influences their self-esteem and psychological well-being. Additionally, they questioned whether it is necessary to go through this situation to become stronger, indicating distress and frustration with the lack of understanding and support from their family:

“The only people who were supposed to accept us were our parents, and they keep criticizing us, and how are we supposed to feel? If your own family disrespects you, who will respect you? The only thing we want is our family’s love, and we don’t have it... but does my mother need to destroy my psychological well-being for me to become strong?”

These results show that to more effectively address mental health issues faced by students, it is important not to limit the discussion solely to the academic environment. Additionally, emotional support, support programs, and education for the community in general are necessary to minimize the negative impact of conflicts in interpersonal relationships, which can be caused by communication problems, prejudices regarding disability, gender, and sexual orientation, among other factors.

However, it is significant to keep in mind that issues related to students’ mental health are much broader and are linked to experiences of violence, prejudice, precarious economic conditions, and lack of support and understanding from the family. Additionally, intersectionality, which considers factors such as social class, race, and gender, is a crucial element that must be addressed with sensitivity, as these factors can have implications for the mental health of students belonging to historically marginalized communities (García-Louis et al., 2022).

Another point to consider is that, according to Vieira and Torrenté (2022), intersectionality is not always perceived by the individual or by those who observe them as a contributing factor to the increase or decrease of emotional suffering. It is necessary to evaluate students’ ability to put protective knowledge and behaviors into practice to preserve and promote mental health. Critical reflection

on their social condition and interaction with the various social factors that influence their health can stimulate this critical perception. Finally, it is important to consider the complexity of the experiences faced by students and generate discussions that ensure that everyone has access to the necessary resources and support to deal with mental health issues.

### **Beyond Grief: Experiencing the Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Academic, Personal, and Mental Health**

The theme describes what college students have declared as the main implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. All reported the pain of grief for the losses felt during the pandemic. Many faced the loss of loved ones, while others said they felt the pain of others, as a result of the loss of people close to them: “we feel the pain of others, the pain of grief. I was sad for the families, neighbors who died, people close to them, and also family members” (Amarilis).

In addition to the pain of grief, many faced other consequences such as uncertainty and anxiety about the future, difficulties in maintaining interpersonal relationships, changes in the pace of life, and lack of access to adequate mental health services. All these factors have impacted the academic, personal, and mental health of students who face additional challenges due to the pandemic.

### **“Another Way of Studying”: Academic Challenges during the Pandemic**

The students reported a series of impacts on their academic journeys resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, including delays in course completion due to class interruption and difficulties adapting to remote learning. In addition, there were drawbacks in establishing connections and uncertainty in the Student Assistance Program, along with inclusion barriers for students with disabilities.

While college students understand the measures taken to interrupt classes, some reported that this prolonged the time for completing their studies. Roger, one of the participants, mentioned that the pandemic was the biggest factor that delayed his education, preventing him from completing the course more efficiently due to setbacks and delays it caused. Moreover, the need to adapt to remote classes was also a challenge for many students. Hortensia, for example, had to suspend her enrollment due to a lack of skills to access online classes. The student explained that she needed help to understand the content and complete assignments but did not receive enough support. The lack of familiarity with the online class format also contributed to the need to suspend enrollment:

“When the pandemic started, I suspended my enrollment, and my colleagues continued, so I’m still in the first semester. I suspended it because I need help, and there was no one to help me. There were regular classes, but online. But I didn’t know how to study online, right?”

A similar experience is reported by another participant, Lionel, for whom the format of remote classes, resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, represented a

challenge for his adaptation, resulting in his failure in several disciplines taught in this model: “And another challenge was during the pandemic in online classes, I didn’t adapt to that situation, so in several disciplines that had been taught, I couldn’t pass.”

For many students, the transition to remote learning mode generated negative consequences in their academic performance. On the other hand, a unique perspective on the effects of remote classes on academic performance was presented by Aquiles, who stated that he was not failed in any discipline, despite the challenges imposed by the context. He highlighted that, even having suffered some personal complications, he managed to keep up with remote classes and emphasized that, although some students pointed out the pandemic and remote classes as factors that harmed their performance, he did not find these barriers.

Students frequently reported the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the continuity of learning, even with remote classes. For example, Rosa and Thor claimed to have faced difficulties in absorbing content, feeling as if they were still at the beginning of their degree due to the challenges faced during the past 2 years. Students’ participation in remote classes was also affected, with reports of virtual presence only to fulfill the obligation, without active participation:

“... I only did one year in person, and then the other two, 2020 and 2021, were remote, and they were terrible because I couldn’t absorb anything. And I’m here now finishing college, and to me, it’s like I’m still in 2019, at the beginning, you know?” (Rosa).

“I showed up in class just to say that I was there, but I didn’t learn anything. I didn’t say anything, I just did the assignments superficially, I did what I could and if it worked, that was good.” (Thor).

It is evident that the pandemic presented numerous additional obstacles for students regarding remote learning. Another challenge exposed by many participants was the lack of a suitable study environment at home, with external distractions such as noise and interruptions from family members to attend to other commitments. In addition, limited access to the internet and the lack of appropriate technological equipment, including old devices, were described as factors that hindered the learning process, resulting in loss of information due to technical failures:

“In the pandemic, the remote [study format], there really wasn’t the correct study space [at home], there was a lot of noise outside. And sometimes I had to stop the class to attend to someone, not stop the class because it wasn’t possible, right? I had to leave, let the class continue... I used the internet at home, but it was bad. The computer was also a problem, I had one since 2016 and it was bad. Since it was very old, some parts broke, and I lost several assignments because it crashed and erased my things, and sometimes I didn’t have the idea to send it to the cloud, so I lost a huge thing, either halfway or complete. And that frustrated me so much, I wanted to give up” (Camélia).

Remote teaching at the university was challenging due to technical constraints such as outdated equipment or unstable internet access, as well as difficulties in

adapting to a new format of teaching and evaluation. Estênio reported that the lack of interaction and discussion in remote classes, along with the unappealing methodology, negatively affected his motivation for the course:

“... The issue of methodology was what hindered me the most, the issue of methodology is not the teacher’s, I think it’s more about everything being new, the way of speaking, not discussing, we only listened, so there was... no feedback. Terrible slides, terrible material. Evaluation was through the UNIR system and the internet is very complicated too, sometimes it would drop. There were, I think, two exams that we couldn’t open. For me, it was quite complicated, it was demotivating, I think that’s the word that sums it up, demotivating. We no longer felt the motivation to be studying and such. I think that’s what made me say, oh, I can’t wait to go back to face-to-face and that’s it. But I never said I couldn’t wait to continue online, never.”

Magnólia, on the other hand, said she faced additional challenges living in a rural area with limited access to satellite internet, which is unstable and does not offer satisfactory quality to support online learning demands. She also faced problems with internet instability, especially during rainy periods, resulting in loss of information and connection interruptions. In addition, the lack of adequate technological resources hindered the learning process.

All these factors contributed to frustration among students and threatened their motivation to continue with their degree. However, despite all the obstacles, they persevered and persisted in their academic journey, as expressed in many accounts:

“... I’m the daughter of 12 siblings that I have, the first one to be in university, so it’s a pride for my mother, it was a pride for my father too, who has already passed away, but he saw me enter college. That’s why, despite everything, I continue here and will graduate” (Rosa).

Another conception commonly argued by students was that the shift to remote learning due to the pandemic negatively affected the formation of interpersonal relationships and social interaction. Calendula pointed out the lack of face-to-face interaction and physical distance as obstacles to creating lasting bonds and friendships, in addition to missing the dynamics of in-person classes. These reports indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted students’ academic experiences, influencing various aspects such as course completion within the deadline, academic performance, access to technological resources, and social interaction.

The literature highlights that adapting to new teaching and learning methods in a brief period was a major challenge for students during the pandemic (Corrêa et al.; Gogoi et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021; Lipka & Sarid, 2022; Madrigal & Blevins, 2022), which was also observed among UNIR students. They faced difficulties in terms of academic performance and other adversities.

Another topic frequently reported as an effect of the pandemic on the academic journey was the Student Assistance Program, addressed by both participants who receive the assistance and those who are not beneficiaries of it. The program is part of the National Student Assistance Plan (PNAES), whose goal



is to ensure equal opportunities among low-income students enrolled in federal institutions of higher education (IFES) and contribute to academic performance. In addition to supporting students' retention, PNAES offers a wide range of services, including housing assistance, food, transportation, health, digital inclusion, culture, sports, daycare, and pedagogical support (Brasil, 2023). The actions are carried out by educational institutions and continuously monitored. UNIR, for example, offers Student Assistance through services, scholarships, and financial aid.

Although some participants were benefited during the COVID-19 pandemic period with the payment of scholarships and aids they already received and the "Emergency Digital Inclusion Assistance" in the shape of internet data packages through chips for mobile phones and equipment acquisition, many students pointed out a series of difficulties regarding access to the student aid offered. Camelia, for example, highlighted the lack of reliability in receiving the aids, as there are frequent delays in releasing the funds: "... despite the student aid, which sometimes takes a long time to come out, so it's not something we can count on right away."

Some considered the importance of financial aid for the purchase of study equipment, since combining work with studies can be challenging, especially for those who study in the morning or afternoon. The lack of financial support can become a barrier for these students:

"The academic assistance for the purchase of equipment I think would be essential not only for me but for other students because I think most of them do not have support to study. I was selected to receive assistance, but so far, there has been no response, probably until August of this year. I am waiting" (Vicenzo).

During the interviews, several difficulties faced by students regarding access to financial aid were raised. Some students reported frustration at not being selected to receive resources, even when they have greater economic difficulties than other students who are beneficiaries. In addition, many highlight the lack of university support for access to financial aid, which can be a hindrance to the continuation of their studies.

"Every time I apply for these aids, I am never selected, then I see people who, like, have less difficulty than me, like, economic difficulty, who receive aid. If I were awarded, it would already be a help, it would be an extra incentive" (Amarílis).

In general terms, the lack of access to aid was considered a major obstacle for continuing studies and a discouraging factor for academic performance. Many students reported needing these resources to cover education-related costs and even basic personal expenses, and their absence seriously compromises the quality and regularity of studies. This sense of lack of support can further demotivate students and harm their academic performance.

The results of this study suggest the need for additional investment in the Student Assistance Program to serve more vulnerable college students and fulfill its

main goals, which include reducing dropout and retention rates in higher education, as well as minimizing the negative effects of social and regional inequalities on course completion and persistence (Brasil, 2023). To achieve these goals, complementary actions aimed at assisting the university community are proposed. However, UNIR has communicated to the university community and society (Universidade Federal de Rondônia, 2022) that the Federal Government has established a monthly execution schedule for the release of financial resources in 2022, through Decree 11,216. Unfortunately, this measure has resulted in a reduction in the budget allocated to maintaining scholarships for students and student aid, negatively impacting university financing and exacerbating inequality in higher education, as confirmed by UNESCO in the previous year (2021).

In addition to the widely recognized academic challenges, this study also addresses the barriers to inclusion faced by people with disabilities in the university environment during the pandemic. As mentioned earlier, Hortensia stated that she dropped out of the course due to the inability to use monitoring services during the period. On the other hand, Álvaro said that he faced challenges in carrying out some academic tasks but found the opportunity to express himself more comfortably and authentically in a video seminar presentation. He said that the lack of guidance from his parents, who did not have the opportunity to study in school, is compensated by using the internet as a source of learning. Additionally, Álvaro faced insecurities and difficulties at the beginning of his academic journey, having even considered quitting, but was encouraged by acquaintances and enlightened about the flexibility and time available for studying at the university. UNIR's support, including the search for a monitor to guide him, was also identified by the student as crucial for success in his academic journey so far.

The results indicate that the pandemic may have worsened the exclusion, with possible implications for equality of access and educational opportunities, despite the recognized support by some students. According to Oliveira (2020), remote learning may have a more severe impact on students with disabilities due to the lack of accessibility of materials and classes. This issue has been little addressed in previous studies on the impact of the pandemic on higher education and deserves attention as it highlights the need for specific support measures for students in crisis situations, especially those who already face additional challenges in their academic journey.

The discussion on the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education cannot ignore the importance of accessibility of educational materials and teaching platforms, especially in the context of remote and hybrid classes. As mentioned by Franco and Gomes (2020) and Martins et al. (2021), this is a fundamental issue to ensure equal access to education for all students. In this sense, a joint effort by educators, managers, and educational technology developers is necessary to ensure that remote and face-to-face classes are accessible to all, so that no one is excluded from the educational process.

## **Experiencing the Consequences: Reflections on the Economic and Emotional Effects of the Pandemic**

During the interviews, the students shared that they realized how the pandemic affected their lives in diverse ways, especially concerning the economy and mental health. Many reported that unemployment was one of the most damaging consequences of the pandemic, as noted in Amarilis' statements, which mentioned the financial difficulty faced by her family and how her sisters were fired from their informal jobs in family homes:

"In my family, there were many cases [of dismissal], my sisters were fired, most of my sisters work in family homes, informally. So, they were sent home, unpaid, and the employers no longer wanted them to work, fearing the virus."

In addition, many participants stated how job loss and financial pressure were a challenge during this period, generating feelings of sadness, worry, and family pressure to find a source of income. Chris, for example, described the pressure from her family to find a job and support herself financially:

"So, it's... COVID, like... it was a difficult time, which delayed, I was unemployed, I was unemployed, right? So, there was a lot of delay, and family pressure, my mother saying, oh, go get a job, go get a job and I was already in college, right? And it was difficult for everyone... And she was putting pressure on, putting pressure on. I felt bad, very bad during that time in 2020 and 2021. I stayed indoors."

While talking about the economic losses suffered during the pandemic, several participants reported that this raised a lot of concern regarding economic sustainability. Vincenzo was one of many who spoke about his difficult financial and employment situation, and that he was struggling to find new job opportunities. Begonia, in turn, had to leave her job to care for sick family members during the pandemic, which resulted in a significant decline in her income, which was already low:

"After the pandemic, there was a lot of [employment] drop because I worked, then there was... after the pandemic there was this thing of a lot of people in the house and my family got sick, then I took care of them there, there at my mother, at home... Then I stopped working to take care of them. I used to work at a family home, only part-time, so now I'm doing daily... only sometimes, right? But a lot of the pandemic fell to here."

In addition to the financial issue, the lack of work also affected the self-esteem and identity of the participants. With the loss of employment, many of them reported experiencing feelings of devaluation and inability to contribute to meeting the needs of their families.

These results indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic hurt the economic situation of college students, especially those who were already facing financial

difficulties before the outbreak. From the reports, it is observed that many students faced job loss, lack of money, and additional financial and family pressures. These consequences can have adverse implications on their lives. Recent studies (García-Louis et al., 2022; Reyes-Portillo et al., 2022) also highlight the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on people in vulnerable economic situations. In addition, many students have missed out on paid internship opportunities and jobs, which can have a significant impact on their already precarious economic situation. Brazil has one of the greatest income and social inequalities in the world (World Inequality Report, 2022), which may exacerbate the effects of the pandemic for Brazilian college students.

In contrast, a student brought a different perspective on his experience. While many had their lives negatively affected in terms of unemployment and financial difficulties during the pandemic, Sísifo said he got a formal job due to the increased demand caused by the pandemic. This highlights the complex and varied effects the pandemic has had on individuals, given their specific circumstances and opportunities. According to his report, for Sísifo, the pandemic provided an opportunity to obtain a job in the health field, which likely would not have happened without the health crisis:

“Right at the beginning of the pandemic, I was immediately worried about the job because I thought it would take a while to find a job, then I got it a month later, but I got it because I had taken an exam in 2017, then they called me, but it was only because of the pandemic. If there hadn’t been the pandemic, they wouldn’t have called me either because it’s in the health area.”

It should be noted, therefore, that it is not possible to standardize this positive implication, as it is necessary to recognize that the effects of the pandemic on the economic situation of college students did not affect everyone equally. Students in vulnerable economic situations and those working in more precarious sectors seem to be facing the greatest impacts (Elharake et al., 2022). Therefore, public policy, financial aid initiatives, and emotional support can help ease financial pressure and support students during challenging times. It is necessary to ensure that they have the necessary conditions to continue their academic journey.

From the participants’ reports, it was also possible to observe the psychic suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Anxiety was a common problem, with Camélia stating that she felt the symptoms, which she describes as anxiety, became more frequent since the start of the pandemic: “I didn’t have many episodes of anxiety, but now it’s much more frequent. And now, I really believe, I don’t believe, I’m sure, that it’s because of the pandemic, for having had all the things we went through.”

Some participants reported feelings of fear, hopelessness, worthlessness, and exhaustion from caring for sick family members or taking extra precautions to avoid contracting the virus. In addition, Estênio and Roger pointed out that the lack of control over the situation and the feeling of powerlessness in the face of the pandemic negatively affected their mental health. Vincenzo expressed the mental suffering caused by the pandemic, including exhaustion and anguish:

“In my point of view, there is a certain mental decay that has stayed with us because it is not easy for us to overcome obstacles, right? Facing the inconveniences that we went through in the pandemic nowadays has affected me a lot because in the past I didn’t feel headaches, I didn’t feel them very often, it’s... despair. Nowadays, I sometimes feel desperation, an affliction, a desire sometimes..., you know?”

The cumulative effect of the pandemic on mental health was mentioned by many participants, with Margarida stating that constant worry and the need to adapt to a new lifestyle contributed to the increase in her anxiety and psychological distress:

“The pandemic got a lot worse; I hadn’t felt anything before, but after the pandemic I started to realize that I started not sleeping well, I kept thinking too much, thinking a lot. It triggered anxiety, I didn’t have any symptoms, I didn’t notice anything, I wasn’t as agitated as I am now, but then I realized that after the pandemic. I was pretty calm.”

Participants’ reports highlighted the need to consider people’s mental health, especially after recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as this unprecedented global crisis has impacted the mental health of college students in several countries, causing a significant increase in disorders (Buizza et al., 2022; Deng et al., 2021; Gogoi et al., 2022). In Brazil, in particular, an even higher rate of college students reported having their mental health affected by the pandemic (Chegg.org, 2021), with anxiety and depression being the main conditions reported (Elharake et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021).

College students are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of the pandemic on their mental health, as they have had to deal with significant changes in their routines and with growing uncertainty about the future (Conceição et al., 2021; Madrigal & Blevins, 2022; Sanchez et al., 2022). In this sense, health-related concerns, such as fear of contracting the virus, concern for family and friends, uncertainty about the future, lack of control, and a feeling of impotence, have contributed to this negative impact on mental health, as evidenced by the participants of this research and in other investigations (Corrêa et al., 2022; Riboldi et al., 2023). The negative repercussions, in the short, medium, and long term, on the mental health of college students must be taken seriously and prioritized in the planning of educational and health policies, as this is a threat to public health.

Lack of access to mental health resources was also noted by students, with several participants mentioning the need for psychological services available at their university:

“I think that not only me, but some people in my class have already questioned why there was no psychologist here at UNIR. Because there are so many families losing their loved ones. In my class, people get [sad] at class time ... then the girl couldn’t even speak because of crying so much. Then they said that there was no, there was no psychologist here” (Begonia).

Several students reported emotional suffering and the need for support but felt unattended or little supported from a psychological perspective. Such a scenario can

be associated with the lack of access to mental health services, which, combined with the feeling of helplessness and impotence arising from the pandemic, intensifies the anguish and psychological suffering of those involved. This problem is of great concern, considering that the mental health of students is fundamental for their well-being, academic performance and permanence in the university (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Most participants even realize that the inclusion of mental health professionals in the university would be an effective measure to help them deal with the crisis and promote emotional and mental health.

Given the above, universities must provide quality mental health services, with qualified professionals to meet the needs of the university community, especially in times of crisis, as recently occurred. Mental health should be seen as a priority in higher education institutions, since the positive impacts of promoting students' emotional health are numerous and directly reflect on their academic trajectory. As such, universities must commit to providing mental health resources and support, creating a learning and development environment that is healthy and welcoming.

## Conclusions

This study presents relevant information about college students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for their mental health and academic life. The main factors that positively and negatively affected the mental health of the participants were identified, as well as the academic, emotional, and social consequences of the pandemic. Symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicidal behavior were reported among students, as well as experience of prejudice, financial difficulties, and conflicts in interpersonal relationships. However, factors such as social support, practices related to spirituality, and art seem to have a positive influence on students' well-being.

The results indicate the importance of investing in mental health services and promoting a healthy, inclusive, and welcoming learning environment to ensure that students have access to the necessary resources to deal with the challenges posed in the post-pandemic academic path. In addition, higher education institutions must be aware of the need for more comprehensive approaches in assisting the university community. However, it is important to recognize the limitations of this study, such as being carried out at a specific time during the pandemic and the absence of indigenous participants, for example. Therefore, future studies should longitudinally investigate the evolution of the impacts of the pandemic, including other minority groups, to broaden the understanding of the subject.

In summary, the current study demonstrates the importance of more comprehensive approaches in assisting the university community, especially about the impacts of the pandemic on mental health and academic life. Understanding these implications is crucial to ensuring a healthier environment, and higher education institutions have a key role to play in promoting students' academic and personal well-being.

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## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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