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Teaching from Home and Emotional Wellbeing during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Digital Native and Digital Immigrant Lecturers in Malaysia's Perspectives

Josephine Chan Ie Lyn[1*], Lee Yuen Beng[2]

[1]School of Business and Management,
 Han Chiang University College of Communication, Penang, 11600, MALAYSIA

[2]Department of Film and Performing Arts, School of Arts,
 Sunway University, Selangor, 47500, MALAYSIA

*Corresponding Author

Abstract: The Covid-19 global pandemic has significantly affected the education sector globally. This study explores the Malaysian higher education lecturers' emotional wellbeing when teaching from home during the Covid-19 pandemic and the differences between the generational cohorts of digital native and digital immigrant lecturers. A qualitative online interview approach was employed on 13 higher education lecturers throughout Malaysia. The study revealed the emotional wellbeing of higher education lecturers was mainly good despite the initial challenges of teaching from home during the pandemic. Stereotypical differences between digital natives and digital immigrants were somewhat evident in the study. Several recommendations were proposed to manage the emotional wellbeing of lecturers while teaching from home.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, emotional wellbeing, higher education lecturers, generational cohort, Malaysia

1. Introduction

On March 18, 2020, the Malaysian government had to suspend teaching and learning activities nationwide due to the rising cases of Covid-19. It was then that all higher education institutions (HEIs) were forced into emergency remote teaching as a temporary measure amid an immediate crisis (Hodges et al., 2020). For many HEI lecturers, this experience was unprecedented, with an extremely steep learning curve (Bailey & Lee, 2020; Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020). Due to fluctuating Covid-19 cases, several nationwide lockdowns were imposed throughout the year, the most recent in June 2021. All HEIs had to continue delivering online lessons from home. What was supposed to be temporary has become a permanent fixture for all HEI lecturers. Previously, working from home enabled more flexibility and work-life balance (Afrianty et al., 2021). Currently, it is a necessity to keep safe. The lockdowns meant lecturers had to adapt quickly to the digitisation of work. All routine tasks such as conducting teaching and assessments, attending meetings, and completing administrative duties had to be carried out remotely from home and in isolation. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has also highlighted significant gaps in the HEIs' technological infrastructures and capabilities, particularly in emerging and developing countries (Afrianty et al., 2021; Chan & Muthuveloo, 2019; Mpungose, 2020). Although online learning started in the late 1990s (Hussin et al., 2009), not all HEIs in Malaysia have embraced it. However, Covid-19 has made online teaching and learning mandatory. The pressure and stress to quickly acquire technological capabilities may negatively affect the HEI lecturers' emotional wellbeing. Extant studies indicated limited qualitative research focusing on the experiences of teachers working from home (Bond et al., 2021), and their emotional wellbeing remains questionable (Gruber et al., 2020; Naylor & Nyanjom,

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2020) and generally under-explored (Han et al., 2020). To fill the research gap, we examined the emotional wellbeing of HEI lecturers when faced with the switch from face-to-face (F2F) classroom teaching to online teaching from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. We also considered the perspectives of the different generational cohorts of lecturers who are digital natives and digital immigrants. The following are our research questions:

- How does the sudden switch to teaching online from home due to COVID-19 pandemic affect the emotional wellbeing of higher education lecturers?
- Are there any differences among the different generational cohorts of higher education lecturers?

2.   Literature Review

2.1 Socio-Technical Theory

In a more recent study, Adams and Ivanov (2015) indicated the usefulness of the socio-technical theory in IT implementation strategies for HEIs. According to the socio-technical theory, joint optimisation between the human/social and technical subsystems is needed for performance to happen at the workplace (Trist, 1981). The social (people and structure) and technical (technology and processes) subsystems are interactive and interrelated. Should one subsystem change, the rest will be affected. This situation quickly became apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic. The sudden move from F2F classroom teaching to teaching online from home disrupted Trist's socio-technical subsystems, especially the social subsystem. Clearly, during the pandemic, optimisation cannot be achieved between the social and technical subsystems and could potentially affect the performance of lecturers teaching online from home. Due to the restrictive movement control order, these lecturers experience isolation for the first time, whereas previously, they interacted with their colleagues, administrative staff, parents and students. Being dependent on technology, facing inadequate support and limited management engagement to coordinate activities or collaborate with peers made matters worse. According to Bentley et al. (2016), organisational support needs to encompass the social and technical subsystems to ensure employees experience a good job fit at the workplace, thus, making working from home more effective. Organisational support for lecturers teaching from home during the pandemic could be related to the availability of psychological and material resources to cope with stress and achieve their goals (Xiong & Zuo, 2019). It could also be in the form of social networks of family members and colleagues at the workplace, which could shorten the learning curve of adopting new technologies as the lecturers switch from F2F classroom teaching to online teaching (Adams & Ivanov, 2015).

2.2 Emotional Wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing is defined when daily positive and negative experiences are balanced (Marzuki, 2013) during the occurrence of disruptive external events (Russell, 2003). According to past studies, schoolteachers, particularly Asian teachers (Chen, 2019), encounter more negative emotional experiences than positive ones (Hassard et al., 2016). Teacher burnout and attrition are due to the inability to cope with negative emotional experiences (Akin et al., 2013). Teachers having good emotional wellbeing can manage their emotions better and experience job satisfaction, good overall wellbeing (Yin et al., 2017), and better teaching performance (Heydarnejad et al., 2017). Before the pandemic, studies focused on factors influencing the emotional wellbeing of HEI lecturers such as work stress (Lawless et al., 2016), personality (Marzuki, 2013), ways to improve emotional wellbeing (Lawless et al., 2016), and training and technological support (Marzuki, 2013). Recent research ranges from HEI lecturers' overall experiences of online teaching during a pandemic (Bailey & Lee, 2020) and the effectiveness of working from home (Afrianty et al., 2020) to a more specific focus on the emotions of lecturers, such as emotional regulation and its effect on emotional wellbeing (Han et al., 2020) and emotions toward online teaching (Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020). In most instances, the sudden shift from F2F classes to teaching from home caused HEI lecturers to experience anxiety and frustration, especially those without any online teaching experience (Bailey & Lee, 2020; Bennett, 2014). Most of these lecturers also have difficulties acquiring new technological skills and applying them in different online teaching pedagogies (Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020). As such, it is essential to be aware that emotions could potentially influence HEI lecturers' integration and engagement with new technologies in their teaching pedagogy.

2.3 Digitisation and Generational Cohorts

The Covid-19 pandemic has become the catalyst for the digitisation of higher education. Extant studies have revealed that different generational cohorts have various technological capabilities, making it difficult for many organisations to encourage positive interactions within an online working environment (Lokuge et al., 2019) and experience tension and communication breakdowns (Urick, 2020). It is critical to understand the differences among generational cohorts to prevent any negative impact on the work relationships and overall performance (Lyons et al., 2015). A generational cohort refers to a specific time duration of which people are born into and experienced similar life-changing events that shape similar beliefs and values that differentiate them from other generational cohorts (Strauss & Howe, 1991). According to Prensky (2001), digital natives and digital immigrants refer to behavioural

preferences for digital technology adoption. Digital immigrants comprise the older generational cohorts of the silent generation, baby boomers and Gen-X, while digital natives the younger cohorts of Gen-Y and Gen-Z (see Table 1).

Table 1 - The Connection between generation cohort, digital immigrant and digital native

Generation Cohort	Also considered as	Past studies
Silent generation (1925 – 1942) Baby boomer (1943 – 1960) Gen-X (1961 – 1981)	Digital Immigrants	• Digital immigrant employees in Lithuania found it harder working from home as they missed the direct contact and feedback from their managers and faced difficulties in differentiating personal and working life (Raišiėn et al., 2020). • Older faculty members in Pakistani universities use lesser IT technologies and have limited IT skills than younger faculty members who have more capabilities using Web 2.0 technologies (Soomro et al., 2020).
Gen-Y (1982 – 2000) Gen-Z (2001 onwards)	Digital Natives	• Digital natives adapted well to working from home as they are more geared toward technology or are more tech-savvy (Raišiėn et al., 2020). • Younger teachers in Swedish schools are more likely to teach using computers (Thunman & Persson, 2013).

(Adapted from Strauss & Howe, 1991; Prensky, 2001)

Evidence of past research has also indicated proficiency in using technology is not solely on differences in generational cohorts. Having an IT mindset among government officials in Bangladesh is related to the willingness to try new IT technology, which is a character trait of a person (Imran & Gregor, 2019). This type of mindset can be further strengthened by IT knowledge and awareness. Furthermore, there is much to learn about the differences in technology acceptance among the different generational cohorts (Kesharwani, 2020). We should not assume that the younger generation or the digital natives are more inclined to technologies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Procedures

We adopted a qualitative approach for the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from March to April 2021 with 13 higher education lecturers who volunteered for the study. Through the interviews, we were able to explore in-depth the higher education lecturers' teaching from home experiences and their emotional wellbeing during the pandemic. Demographic questions (age range, position, subject taught, organisation, teaching experience, digital tools experience) were first asked, followed by an open-ended question on their online teaching experience during the pandemic – *"Can you please describe the sudden shift to online teaching experience during COVID-19 movement control order?"*. Follow-up questions given were such as *"What was your initial reaction towards teaching from home?"* and *"What were the challenges faced?"*.

3.2 Research Participants

The research participants were 13 lecturers from various HEIs in Malaysia. As this study focused on emotional wellbeing, convenient sampling was employed where the research participants were personal contacts or referrals. Rapport and trust with the participants were quickly established with this approach. As most of the past emotional wellbeing studies were focused on one specific school or university, this study reached out to lecturers from nine different HEIs (two colleges, one university-college, and six universities) throughout Malaysia. There was a good representation of lecturers across three generational cohorts. We considered the baby boomer and Gen-X cohorts as digital immigrants and the Gen-Y cohort as digital natives. Of the thirteen participants, nine were digital immigrants (specifically, four baby boomers and five Gen-X) and four digital natives (Gen-Y). The majority were from Penang (6), while the rest from Perak (2), and one from Kedah, Melaka, Kuala Lumpur, Sabah, and Sarawak respectively. The minimum education level among the participants was a Bachelor's degree (1), while the rest with postgraduate degrees (12). Besides teaching, five participants also held managerial positions. Most of the research participants did not have online teaching experience. Recruitment for new participants stopped once we achieved data saturation where there was no more emergence of new themes. Table 1 shows details of the demographic profile.

Table 1 - Demographic profile of research participants

Research Participant	Gender	Age Group	Institution	Location	Position	Education	Teaching Experience	Prior Online Teaching Experience	Interview Duration/ Mode
RP1	F	57-75	College A	Penang	HOS	Master	> 25 years	None	00:40:44 (GM)
RP2	M	57-75	UC A	Penang	PC	PhD	12 years	9 years*	00:30:21 (HP)
RP3	M	57-75	College A	Penang	Lecturer	Bachelor	> 40 years	None	00:32:49 (HP)
RP4	M	57-75	Uni F	KL	Pro-VC & Dean	PhD	15 years	None	00:47:30 (GM)
RP5	M	41-56	Uni A	Perak	Lecturer	DBA	5 years	None	00:47:50 (GM)

RP6	F	41-56	Uni B	Sabah	Senior Lecturer	Master	21 years	Some	00:55:03 (GM)
RP7	F	41-56	College B	Penang	Lecturer	DBA	9 years	None	00:40:10 (GM)
RP8	M	41-56	Uni A	Perak	Lecturer	PhD	> 5 years	None	00:37:53 (GM)
RP9	M	41-56	Uni E	Melaka	Director & AP	PhD	23 years	5 years*	00:39:18 (GM)
RP10	F	25-40	UC A	Penang	Lecturer	Master	7 years	None	00:28:26 (GM)
RP11	M	25-40	UC A	Penang	Lecturer	Master	6 years	None	00:43:38 (GM)
RP12	F	25-40	Uni C	Sarawak	Senior Lecturer	Master	6 years	4 years*	00:57:14 (GM)
RP13	F	25-40	Uni D	Kedah	HOP	PhD	8 years	4 years*	00:50:39 (GM)

Note:

1. *Based on blended teaching experience and not 100% online teaching
2. Uni refers to University; UC refers to University-College; HOS refers to Head of School; VC refers to Vice-Chancellor; PC refers to Programme Coordinator; AP refers to Associate Professor, HOP refers to Head of Programme.
3. Age group: 57 – 75 years old (Baby Boomer); 41 – 56 years old (Gen-X); 25 – 40 years old (Gen-Y).
4. Note that Digital Immigrants are baby boomer and Gen-X lecturers and Digital Natives are Gen-Y lecturers.

3.3 Data Analysis

The interviews were the primary data source and were all conducted through Google Meet, except for two respondents who requested phone interviews. The interviews lasted between 28 to 57 minutes (see Table 1). Audacity, a free audio recording software, was used to record the interviews, which were transcribed immediately after each interview. The verbatim transcription of all the interviews conducted was 60 pages. The respective lecturers confirmed the interview transcripts. Any requested amendments were immediately addressed. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to analyse the interview data. First, we extensively coded the responses for better understanding, assigned preliminary codes to the data, and identified different patterns and themes. Next, we reviewed the emerging themes and finalised the main themes. Finally, we reported the findings. Disagreements on the coding were settled through discussion and re-examining the interview data until reaching a consensus.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 The Emotional Wellbeing of Higher Education Lecturers

During the interviews, the higher education lecturers revealed a range of emotions when they initially heard that they had to immediately switch from F2F classroom teaching to online teaching from home. The initial reactions toward this sudden shift were utter dismay, shock, and filled with high anxiety – *"my cold sweat broke out"* (RP1), *"my mind went blank!"* (RP2), *"SHIT, SHIT, oh SHIT!"* (RP5) and *"I freaked out"* (RP7). Others shared that they did not like online teaching from home and found it difficult due to their preference for F2F classroom teaching (RP13) or due to the subject itself, Mathematics, which needed to be taught step-by-step (RP3). Some found the sudden shift difficult but had a positive outlook – *"When MCO hit us, at first, I told myself that this could be one of the ways to change. I look at it from a positive angle. [...]. But of course, I was struggling too"* (RP6) or loved technology – *"The transition did not affect me that much, because I love technology"* (RP11). For RP12, she was anxious about the lack of privacy as her students could see her home surroundings. Some lecturers were indifferent and did not panic as they did not mind the shift (RP10, RP8) or felt prepared due to previous blended learning experiences (RP9).

All these initial reactions are considered normal. The wide range of emotions experienced is not surprising and consistent with past studies (Bailey & Lee, 2020; Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020). Both positive and negative emotions are usually present when new technologies are adopted (Bennett, 2014). Several higher education lecturers needed more time to process and appraise the disruptive situation, while others accepted it and got on with life. It was good to note that despite challenges faced during online teaching from home, nearly all the higher education lecturers rated their emotional wellbeing as *"good and above"*. Most revealed they are already used to the *"new normal"* and feel very positive and motivated.

4.2 Differences among the Generational Cohorts

Findings from extant studies have indicated differences among the generational cohorts, especially in technological adoption (Lyons et al., 2015; Urick, 2020). In our study, the older generational cohorts of baby boomer and Gen-X lecturers refer to the digital immigrants, while the Gen-Y lecturers refer to the digital natives.

The obvious difference between digital natives and digital immigrants is balancing their personal and work life. The findings of past studies are inconclusive if the digital natives (younger Gen-X and Gen-Y lecturers) face more difficulties teaching from home than the digital immigrants (baby boomer lecturers). According to Raišiėn et al. (2020), digital teleworker natives in Lithuania had no issues with working from home, while Urick (2020) highlighted that the younger generational cohort of workers had difficulties working from home due to a lack of childcare help during the pandemic. Our findings indicate that the Gen-Y lecturers in Malaysia struggled with teaching from home as they

suddenly had to manage housework and children, teach, and in some cases, handle administrative work - *"Of course, there are also challenges when we work from home. We have other distractions like cooking, doing the house chores, taking care of children. I think the students are very understanding. Sometimes when I'm teaching, my son will disrupt my class"* (RP12). The baby boomer and Gen-X lecturers do not face such challenges as their children have reached adulthood – *"There were no major downsides for me because it's my wife and myself living together. My kids are away, so we didn't have the same kind of pressures and tensions that a lot of other families have, especially with young children, where they have to manage their children's work and manage housework"* (RP4).

Second, most of the digital immigrant lecturers highlighted the positive effects of the pandemic on their teaching as well as on the HEIs, while digital native lecturers were indifferent. The digital immigrant lecturers shared they were pushed out of their comfort zone into trying out new technological apps or tools - *"This could be one of the ways for many or all of us to start looking into how to integrate online platforms into our teaching"* (RP6). Another lecturer, who also holds a management position, believed Covid-19 had forced his university to review their strategic plans into digitalising the university – *"Most universities had to bridge the gaps that they realised was lacking. As a result of all that's happening, they had to make strategic plans and change direction altogether - in terms of how we teach moving forward post-pandemic. Whatever can be done online, we'll do it as an ODL. [...]. For that to happen, then the infrastructure in the university has to change. We now have to allocate a certain amount of budget for that kind of transition to happen"* (RP4).

Third, the majority of the digital immigrant lecturers (the baby boomer generation cohort) mentioned that training and IT support provided assurance and confidence for them to try new technologies. For instance, RP1, who was most apprehensive toward using technology in teaching revealed, *"First of all, definitely people like us, we must have training. I'm terrified of all these gadgets and apps. But thank God, training is given to us. With the training, I dare to try through trial and error. If I make any mistakes, I know I have the backup of these people to ask a question. They will help me again"*. The same line of thought was evident with RP2 – *"If we do not know anything, we can contact ITS [Information Technology Support]. Then ITS will teach us how to start up and what we need to add to our computers. I was very relieved to depend on ITS. If we get stuck, we only need to call ITS, and they will straight away help us"*. Finally, RP4 revealed he was not overly worried about the sudden shift to online teaching because *"I always had people whom I might call on if I needed help with certain functions"*. The other digital immigrant lecturers from the Gen-X cohort did not mention much adversity toward adopting technology for their online classes. As expected, the digital native lecturers (Gen-Y cohort) experienced minimal technological challenges - *"Actually, it was easy for me to adapt. Maybe because I'm good at exploring new technology apps and all that. So, during the pandemic, it was easy for me to adapt with the technology stuff"* (RP13). These experiences are consistent with Naylor and Nyanjom (2020). They highlight the need for timely technical support or on-hand assistance whenever new introduction of technologies to ensure successful adoption of new technologies. Also, those who like technology would find it easy to adapt and experiment with the new technologies (Bhattacherjee et al., 2017).

Fourth, we should not assume that all digital immigrant lecturers from the older generational cohort dislike new technologies. RP3, a baby boomer in his 70s, independently solved his online teaching issues by searching for relevant technological tools (a pen tablet) to help him conduct his online Math class. Another baby boomer in his early 60s, RP4, experimented with a new technology introduced while teaching from home – *"In terms of experimentation, it's not a problem. So, despite my age, I'm not an expert by any longshot, but I'm not averse to new tools. If I use it often enough, it's quite easy"*.

Lastly, during the pandemic, it is common for the digital immigrant lecturers to depend on their fellow digital native colleagues when facing technological difficulties during online teaching – *"We are supporting each other. Especially for older lecturers, they might have difficulties to adapt to these technologies, so the younger lecturers will be supporting them on how to use the technological tools"* (RP13). From our interviews, however, the digital native lecturers shared that at times they too needed technological help. These lecturers were comfortable seeking help when having difficulties with the new online teaching platform or technological applications – *"I did call up my Head of Department when I was a bit unsure about certain things like how to operate Google Meet or whatever, and she'll help me out"* (RP10) or *"In terms of support, if there are certain things that I do not know, I'll ask my colleagues"* (RP11). RP13 puts everything into perspective about giving or asking for help – *"The thing is we cannot be ignorant. If we don't know how to use a certain technological tool, there is no harm in asking people for help"*. This experience contrasts Bennett's (2014) findings, where higher education lecturers in the UK were reluctant to seek IT help or knowledge from their colleagues for fear of being humiliated or ridiculed. One probable reason for the different experiences could be the cultural differences found in both studies.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Given the macro evidence supporting the benefits of teaching from home as highlighted in extant studies and confirmed by the higher education lecturers of this study, it is clear that teaching from home is here to stay. The lecturers' insights from the current study are critical for the management of HEIs in ensuring a better support system to structure the continuing future of teaching from home. Lecturers teaching from home are isolated from their social network of colleagues, friends and family. They are unable to socialise and remain disconnected from their community.

We wonder how they might be able to teach well when they are unfamiliar with the new technologies thrown at them. If we expect these lecturers to teach from home effectively, then the management of HEIs must take appropriate actions. They need to ensure a joint optimisation of the social and technical aspects for the lecturers when teaching from home. All the interviewed higher education lecturers highlighted the importance of technical support regardless from the organisation, peers or family. Although some past studies indicate digital native lecturers from the Gen-Y cohort adapting well to technology use in classroom teaching, our findings are somewhat different. Some of the digital immigrant lecturers from the older generational cohorts – baby boomers and Gen-X – are the ones who demonstrated more initiative and excitement to use new technologies when teaching from home. As Imran and Gregor (2019) maintained, effective adoption of new technologies is more of having an IT mindset than being a digital native.

If teaching from home is to be effective, then the management of HEIs needs to address the challenges faced by the younger lecturers (digital natives and the younger digital immigrants). A more flexible work schedule is needed to support these lecturers as they juggle their family and teaching duties. Although the higher education lecturers did not explicitly talk about their emotional wellbeing, it could be detected during the interview sessions that their initial experiences toward the sudden switch to teaching from home using new technologies were stressful for some of them. Nonetheless, due to their teaching experiences (between 5 to 40 years), these higher education lecturers could quickly adapt to the new technologies used during teaching from home albeit a steep learning curve. It is also clear that those involved in management positions are empathetic towards their teaching staff and continually monitor their lecturers' wellbeing. This action should be part of all HEI management policies and procedures during the pandemic.

In light of the teaching from home experiences shared by the higher education lecturers during the Covid-19 pandemic, the lecturers revealed that they have adjusted to the new normal of teaching from home. Through the lecturers' conversations during the interview sessions, we conclude that any initial fears or anxieties in adopting new technologies when teaching from home can be easily overcome if there are proper procedures and policies in-placed, continuous technical support given, and constant checking in on the lecturers' emotional wellbeing.

Acknowledgement

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