

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

How Did Japanese University Students Survive the COVID-19 Pandemic?

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ABSTRACT

Since the initial outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in neighboring China in late 2019, Japanese university students have been faced with the fear of being infected with COVID-19, as well as the policies implemented by their schools and governments to mitigate the spread. In this paper, we discuss how Japanese university students have survived during this period. Beginning with an overview of the COVID-19 outbreak in Japan, we examine the impact of the pandemic on Japanese university students, particularly in terms of their mental health. From an activity perspective, we elucidate how students withstood pandemic conditions, and the best strategies they used for adapting to this lifestyle. We aim to present a study of Japanese university students that can contribute to an understanding of university students' mental health under this pandemic worldwide.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, University, College Student, Japanese, Transition, Resilience, Adjustment, Campus Life

INTRODUCTION

The SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, first recognized in China in late 2019, was declared a global pandemic in March 2020 by the WHO. By November 2021, there have been approximately 240 million cases and 50 million deaths worldwide. In Japan, there were 6.7 million cases of infection and nearly 28,000 deaths (World Health Organization, 2022) by March 2022. Japanese university students felt fear of infection, and their lives have been greatly impacted by the policies implemented by their universities and local governments as the pandemic has progressed since then.

The social, political, and economic disruptions, as well as the anxieties and losses caused by the spread of COVID-19 itself are generally referred to as the *Corona-ka* (コロナ禍; Coronavirus crisis), and they have negatively impacted public mental health in Japan. For example, a meta-analysis of mental health during the pandemic by Wu et al. (2021) found that depressive symptoms and insomnia had been observed in about 30–40% of all respondents.

The first case of COVID-19 in Japan was confirmed on January 15, 2020, and by February the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of Japanese university students began to manifest. Because in Japan the school year begins in April and ends in March of the following year, some university students and high school seniors who would be entering their first year of university as freshmen did not even have the opportunity to say goodbye to their friends and have a traditional graduation ceremony. This also means that March and April are the moving season for campus residents, and there is accordingly a large flow of people in and out, which could severely spread infection. In-person entrance ceremonies in April 2020 were therefore also cancelled at many universities. Subsequently, online lectures commenced in most universities in place of the classroom setting, as access to campus facilities was restricted.

While face-to-face classes have since re-started in elementary, junior high, and high schools, universities were mainly operating online in 2020 to 2021. This has led to dissatisfaction, inability to make friends, anxiety about being alone, and several other stressors among university students (Hashimoto, 2021). As has been the case worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of university students in Japan.

The Direct Effect of COVID-19 on University Students

Since the university student population in Japan primarily comprises young people (i.e., aged 29 or less; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019), we will discuss the direct effects of COVID-19 on the young age groups. According to a report by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), while there is no difference in the rates of confirmed COVID-19 cases between the 18–29 and 65 or older age groups, the latter were 10 times more likely to be hospitalized and 300 times more likely to die as a result. Consistent with this report, younger individuals accounted for one-third of all confirmed cases in Japan. However, the number of deaths and severe illnesses in this age group was negligible (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2021). Nevertheless, while less common than in the older age groups, there have been certain severe cases among the youth. For example, according to a clinical epidemiological study of early COVID-19 patients in Japan (Matsunaga et al., 2020), approximately 10% of confirmed cases among the youth required respiratory support during hospitalization. Unfortunately, there are only a few studies on younger age groups regarding risk factors and prognosis, although severe COVID-19 cases among these age groups have been confirmed. Instead, studies on COVID-19 severity in Japan have mainly focused on older age groups (Miike et al., 2021; Terada et al., 2021). There might be more reporting on the

elderly to prevent fatal outcomes from infection in the older group. Further research would also focus on recovery of severe cases in the young group. In Japan, those with mild or asymptomatic cases of COVID-19 were allowed home recuperation or isolation care (non-hospitalization). In the case of home recuperation, the patient is required to spend a specific time period (usually 10 days from onset of symptoms) at rest while being provided with food and other daily necessities. In isolation care, hotels are used as isolation facilities for patients to isolate and rest in private rooms, under medical observation. The rules of the isolation facilities are strictly enforced, and patients are not allowed to leave the area. Based on findings in other countries that quarantine and isolation had increased individuals' stress (Huy et al., 2021), these isolation strategies were considered stressful for COVID-19 patients with asymptomatic or mild symptoms. Moreover, because the young age group was characterized by a high number of infections but mostly asymptomatic or mild disease, they were assumed to experience more stress from isolation. Since there have been no empirical studies on the effects of isolation on the mental health of young people in Japan, this research needs to take place so that these effects can be identified.

Transition to Campus Life

It is not common in Japan for students to take a “gap year” after high school graduation to engage in various activities such as studying abroad or volunteering. Most Japanese high school students attend university the year following high school graduation. If they fail the university entrance examination, they spend that time studying for the next year's exam.

The transition to campus life can be a significant challenge for university freshmen. One reason for this is the gap between their expectations beforehand and the reality of the

university life they encounter. In many cases, this gap is characterized by high expectations before entering university that are not satisfied by the actual campus life they experience (Baker et al., 1985; Chishima & Mizuno, 2015; Nadelson et al., 2013). In other words, campus life is often a disappointment to freshmen when they begin university.

Chishima and Mizuno (2015) found that freshmen's expectations of university life comprised four aspects: "academics," "friendships," "free time," and "events." They conducted an exploratory factor analysis with questionnaire items developed from free descriptions of expectations of campus life in each of these categories, and gaps between those expectations and reality. A large expectation gap in the academic domain would indicate that what one expected to learn at university was not actually learned. A gap in the friendships category would mean they had expected to make close friends and enjoy social activities, but this had not happened as much as they had hoped. In terms of free time, a gap would mean they had expected to have more free time but are too burdened by their studies. With regard to events, a gap would indicate there being fewer fun events than they had expected at university. The results of the study showed that freshmen perceived these expectation gaps negatively, and if they were unable to find any positive aspects of it, their adjustment to university was impaired (Mizuno & Chishima, 2018).

After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the unique circumstances imposed by the situation meant that most first-year students experienced an extremely large expectation gap, along with significant negative impacts on many of them. In the following sections, we present a review of research in Japan, focusing on the aspects of academics and friendships; Chishima and Mizuno (2015) have demonstrated that students have higher expectations from these two aspects than other areas.

The foremost factor that increased the expectation gap in the area of academics was the sudden and often ill-prepared implementation of online classes. To combat the spread of infection, Japanese universities partially implemented online classes nationwide, although the degree of implementation varied between urban areas, where the spread of COVID-19 was severe, and rural areas. Before COVID-19, online classes were offered at only a few universities in Japan. In a comparison between freshmen in 2019 and those in 2020, Horita et al. (2021) showed that while those in 2020 had lower levels of depression, they also experienced more academic stress as they adjusted to the unfamiliar mode of online classes. In addition, a survey study by Iida et al. (2021) found that half of university students, including those in upper-level classes (48.1% for real-time online classes and 52.4% for recorded online classes), felt burdened by online classes. This attitude, therefore, is not limited to first-year students. Similarly, in a survey of mainly first- and second-year students, Hashimoto (2021) found that the greatest source of stress during the pandemic was related to correctly understanding how to take online classes and assignments. But students' experiences with online classes differed depending on seniority, with freshmen preferring face-to-face classes over online classes more than upperclassmen did (Ito et al., 2021). This may be due the survey being conducted in the spring of 2020, with freshmen not getting the chance to experience in-person classes on a university campus for the first time. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the main gap between academic expectations and reality for students concerned what they could learn in university (Chishima & Mizuno, 2015), but after COVID-19, the main gap became related to how they participate in university classes.

The implementation of online classes and closure of campus activities also had a significant impact on the expectation gap in terms of friendships. Classmates who they

expected to meet on campus could only be met online, and it was much more difficult to develop relationships with them as it would be in face-to-face encounters. These concerns are reflected in the scale developed by Ito et al. (2021) for measuring anxiety in university life which included the item “I am worried about making friends,” and the one developed by Hashimoto (2021) for measuring stress during the pandemic which included the item “It is difficult to make new relationships.” In addition, there is a special feature of Japanese university life known as “circles,” which are unofficial clubs created by students to provide a safe place to expand interpersonal relationships through group activities (Arai & Matsui, 2003). These too were restricted by the onset of the pandemic and campus closures, and Fujii’s (2021) original COVID-19 anxiety scale for university students therefore includes a subscale of “circle anxiety” to reflect this situation. The expectation gap regarding friendships on campus has become so large in the pandemic era that it cannot be compared with normal times.

Changes in the Activities of Japanese University Students During the Pandemic

The pandemic imposed the risk of and fear of infection, along with the various secondary limitations on activity due to public health restrictions resulting from it.” When the nation-wide government-imposed lockdown order was lifted in Japan, while there was no longer a punitive ban on going out, many educational institutions maintained restrictions to on-site work and classes to avoid outbreaks among students, faculty and staff. University students who expected to be allowed to enter the campus and attain learning experiences outside the classroom (e.g., circle activities) were forced to change their planned activities.

Student autonomy was therefore hindered for an extended period beyond the initial lockdown. Satisfying the need for autonomy is a prerequisite for personal well-being, along

with the needs for competence and relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Less autonomy also meant that the students had fewer opportunities and choices for engaging in “happiness-relevant activities” that are one way to facilitate psychological well-being (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). In a pre-pandemic survey of Japanese university students concerning their leisure activity choices (Kubo & Sawamiya, 2018), results showed that preferred activities involved going out and interacting with others, such as team sports. Pandemic-related restrictions preventing such activities could therefore have led to additional psychological distress and contributed to the decline in the mental health and well-being of university students.

Therefore, finding new activities that conform to pandemic restrictions were critical to maintain good mental health and well-being. One study of college students reported that engaging in new activities and satisfaction with leisure time was a protective factor against mental health problems (Tahara et al., 2021). Thus, it is possible to overcome circumstances and increase one’s resilience by being creative in choosing new recreational activities to engage in. Higher levels of resilience were found to prevent a decline in mental health when restricted from going out among Japanese people in general (Kubo et al., 2021a).

Japanese University students experienced several changes in activities that were specifically due to pandemic restrictions. Many of these changes were negative ones, but there were also positive aspects showing the benefits of resilience. There were three categories of activity that significantly changed for students: educational activities, interpersonal activities, and leisure activities.

Educational Activities

Restrictions on school attendance in Japan began on March 2, 2020, when the prime minister requested the temporary closure of all elementary, junior high, high, and special needs schools across the country. Most universities followed suit, and prepared for online classes by delaying the start of the academic session. Both students and faculty members needed time to adjust and prepare for the virtual format to online classes. It is also true that, as a consequence of these measures, the digitization of education has progressed significantly.

Several studies have investigated factors that enhance the online education experience. One study reported that college students with better online social skills were better able to adjust to online classes (Yonezawa & Nakadera, 2021). Student satisfaction with educational activities could therefore be improved by delivering introductory lectures explaining how to communicate through the given online platform and encouraging such interactions. However, some students have an independent learning attitude and prefer a more individual experience. In a study of first-year Japanese university students with more independent learning attitudes, most reported that online classes were not a good fit for them (Nagai, 2021). While the quality of online classes has improved dramatically in the pandemic era, face-to-face classes seem to remain a necessary part of educational activities for many, and especially for first-year students.

Interpersonal Activities

Activities involving more than one person are no longer recommended by government policy, especially those involving eating and drinking. Various measures have been implemented to prevent infection, such as wearing masks and maintaining physical distance. By increasing the physical distance between people, these have also increased psychological space. It was been reported that in May and June of 2020, about 40% of students at one Japanese

university felt lonely and isolated, and about 10% at another showed depressive symptoms above a moderate level (NIPPON HOSO KYOKAI, 2020). Another study found that college students with high attachment anxiety reported poorer mental health under pandemic restrictions, and those with increased loneliness reported increased attachment avoidance (Nakao, 2021). These results suggest that a sense of security regarding relationships helps maintain mental health, and that feeling lonely can lead to further withdrawal from society (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). In the case of university students, the major problem appears to be loneliness, therefore the development of interpersonal connections is critical to the maintenance of their mental health.

Leisure Activities

The pandemic severely limited leisure activities in daily life. University students in particular were unable to visit their campuses, significantly limiting their extracurricular activities. According to a survey by the National Federation of University Cooperative Associations (2021), the percentage of first-year students belonging to clubs decreased considerably, from 82.8% in 2019 to 48.7% in 2020. The survey (National Federation of University Cooperative Associations, 2021) also showed that the percentage of students reporting, “university life is fulfilling” decreased from 88.8% in 2019 to 74.2% in 2020. The percentage for first-year students was 56.5%, the lowest since 1983. In this context, using the Internet has become an important leisure activity for university students.

In a study on the general Japanese population, Kubo et al. (2021b) identified passive activities such as watching movies, listening to music, surfing the Internet, and playing video games as popular categories of leisure activities. Controllable desire to engage in the activity

(harmonious passion; Vallerand, 2015) improved mental health during the pandemic (Kubo et al., 2021b; Peixoto et al., 2021). Therefore, we can assume that well-balanced and harmonious Internet activities have helped maintain college students' mental health. However, countermeasures must be taken against the unhealthy engagement with the Internet, such as with Internet addiction and gaming disorder, though these are global phenomena and not limited to university students.

The restrictions on activities that have impaired university students' independence is a major negative aspect of the changes made due to the pandemic. Nevertheless, a silver lining in these changes is that digitization, especially in education and interpersonal activities, has promoted efficiency and productivity for university students. It seems that protective factors, such as resilience and harmonious passion, have been essential to maintain mental health and well-being during the pandemic. We need to continue to develop ideas on how to enhance these preventive factors when such activities are restricted.

How Did Japanese University Students Survive the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Studies on mental health during the pandemic are being reported at a rapid pace, and many of them have included investigations into how university students have adjusted to higher education in such a context (e.g., Cao et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Even before the pandemic, it had been shown that factors such as living away from parents, stressful events, schoolwork and job hunting worsen Japanese students' adaptation to higher education (e.g., Okubo, 2005). But university life in the pandemic is very different than it was before; cancellation or postponement of the entrance ceremonies, the sudden switch to online classes, and the suspension of club activities have made the adjustment of university students more difficult

than ever before.

Numerous studies have shown how damaging the COVID-19 pandemic has been for the mental health of college and university students. In a study, of college students in the United States conducted after one month of their initial lockdown, Son et al. (2020) found that about 90% were concerned about their own health or that of their loved ones and reported difficulty concentrating. In a large survey of US college students from March–April 2020, Browning et al. (2020) showed students who were women, were non-Hispanic Asian, had poor health, had diminished family income, or knew someone infected with COVID-19 experienced mental health issues. Around the same time, Odriozola-González et al. (2020) found that about 30% of Spanish university students reported moderate to severe anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Similar results have been reported in Japan, where a cross-sectional study of university students in May-June of 2020 found that being female and more frequent smoking and drinking alcohol predicted higher levels of depression during that time (Nomura et al., 2021). However, it has also been reported that for some Japanese university students, adjustment to student life was actually improved by the pandemic and associated online learning (Horita et al., 2021).

It seems likely that the impact of the pandemic on university students differs greatly depending on the circumstances of the given country or region, such as severity of spread and measures taken that affect the education experience. The fluctuations in cases, transformation of infection control measures, the issuance and lifting of emergency declarations, and the opening and closure of university premises have changed dramatically throughout the pandemic. University life in 2020 was particularly plagued by difficulties that university students had never encountered before, such as the cancellation of entrance ceremonies and sudden switch to online lectures.

Sugawara et al. (2022) conducted a small survey for Japanese students of all grades and interview for first-year students, asking them to report their subjective level of adjustment from April to December of 2020. The results showed that first-year students were less adjusted than students in all other years in April 2020, but by October 2020 there were no difference in adjustment, and adjustment improved in all students.

The study by Sugawara et al. (2022) also included interviews with first-year students at the university. They discussed having to either return to their parents' homes or cancel their move to the vicinity of the university and live at home after the declaration of a state of emergency. It was not until the fall semester of 2020 that they were able to move to the vicinity of the university. Some students reported being able to register for university courses without difficulty because they had friends, while others reported having difficulty registering due to insufficient support. Similarly, some students said they had gotten used to online classes and were able to progress at a moderate pace, while others could not get used to the format and keep pace with the workload (Sugawara et al., 2022).

As the fall semester came around and when face-to-face classes were still not available, students reported improvement their online engagement, sharing information, making new friends, and adjusting to university life better. The more opportunities students had to make friends (e.g., interacting with high school friends on social media while at home, participating in online events run by the university) the better they tended to adjust (Sugawara et al., 2021).

SUMMARY

University life in the year 2020 was severely disrupted by the the COVID-19 pandemic, and not just because of the threat of the disease itself, but also stressful public health restrictions,

cancellations of events such as the entrance ceremony and freshman festival, and the sudden and unplanned switch to online classes (e.g., Hashimoto, 2021). In addition to this, first-year university students experienced a larger than normal gap between their prior expectations of university life and the reality of living it (Mizuno & Chishima, 2018). They were unable to form friendships before the start of the new semester and received less support from upperclassmen and classmates than what freshman would normally get by participating in club or circle activities. This situation worsened their adjustment process to university life. However, students who were more willing to take on new challenges and had the opportunity to make friends and interact with others online adapted better, despite these difficulties. Japanese University students have been able to use their resilience to survive university life in the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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