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Research Article

Navigating the Storm: The Impact of COVID-19 on University Faculty Members – A Qualitative Insight

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Abstract

Objective: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on various aspects of life; however, understanding its specific effects on university faculty members has remained limited. The present study aims to explore the psychological, professional, and social consequences of the pandemic on the faculty of Shahrekord University.

Method: A phenomenological approach was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with 12 purposefully selected faculty members from Shahrekord University. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Marshall and Rossman's reductionist and interpretive methods.

Results: Data analysis revealed two main categories of challenges faced by faculty members: professional and psychological. Professionally, they experienced disruptions in their research, difficulties with online teaching, burnout, and limited opportunities for academic growth and development. Psychologically, they reported heightened anxiety, fear of illness, and feelings of isolation. To cope, participants employed various strategies, including social interaction, religious practices, diverse teaching methods, limited in-person contact, physical exercise, and cognitive techniques.

Conclusions: The findings underscore the importance of providing culturally sensitive mental health support, faculty training in coping strategies, and institutional flexibility to enhance resilience and maintain educational quality during crises.

Keywords:COVID-19, University Faculty, Qualitative Study, Psychological Well-being, Health.

Extended Abstract

Background and Objectives

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented disruptions worldwide, including profound transformations in the academic landscape. Faculty members in universities, as key actors in the educational system, faced a wide array of professional and psychological challenges. The present study aims to fill this gap by examining the lived experiences of university faculty members during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the perceived challenges they faced and the coping strategies they employed.

Materials and Method

The research employed a qualitative content analysis approach to explore and categorize the experiences of university faculty. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit 12 faculty members from various academic disciplines at Shahrekord University. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which provided the participants with the opportunity to narrate their experiences in a flexible yet focused manner. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using conventional content analysis methods, involving open coding, categorization, and theme development.

Results

Analysis of the data revealed two major thematic domains: professional challenges and psychological challenges, along with a third overarching theme that encompassed coping strategies. In the domain of professional challenges, four main subthemes were identified:

1. Research Activities: Participants reported significant disruptions to their research endeavors. Some experienced decreased motivation, difficulty in accessing resources, and cancellation of fieldwork and laboratory-based studies. On the other hand, a subset of participants described a silver lining, highlighting the increased time for writing and data analysis that resulted from reduced commuting and administrative duties.
2. Educational Challenges: The shift to online education emerged as a double-edged sword. While it enabled the continuity of teaching, many participants expressed frustration over reduced interaction with students, difficulty in assessing learning outcomes, and increased workload. Technological limitations and lack of familiarity with online platforms also contributed to these difficulties.
3. Occupational Burnout: Faculty members discussed the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life during remote work. The constant availability expected by students and institutions, along with extended screen time, led to feelings of exhaustion and burnout.
4. Professional Development Constraints: Several participants expressed concerns about missing opportunities to attend academic conferences, workshops, and collaborative projects. These limitations hindered their career advancement and academic networking, causing a sense of professional stagnation.

In the domain of psychological challenges, three central themes emerged: Anxiety and Stress, Fear of Illness, Depression, and Isolation. In response to these challenges, participants adopted various coping strategies, which were categorized into six key types: 1. Social Interactions, 2. Religious and Spiritual Practices, 3. Variety in Teaching Methods, 4. Limited In-Person Engagements, 5. Physical Exercise, and 6. Cognitive Strategies.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study offer a relatively comprehensive picture of the multilayered and complex impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on university faculty members in Iran. Similar to international reports, participants in this research

experienced increased anxiety, occupational burnout, diminished educational engagement, and disruptions to their research activities. However, certain cultural and contextual features emerged that uniquely characterized the Iranian experience. One of the most significant findings was the role of religious and spiritual coping strategies in the context of the study. Many participants relied on prayer, supplication, and religious interpretations to cope with the psychological pressures resulting from the crisis. These experiences suggest that, in Iranian culture, spirituality serves as a crucial source of emotional balance and a means of regaining a sense of meaning—especially under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity. Moreover, the data revealed that gender roles and social expectations had a significant influence on faculty members' experiences. Female participants frequently spoke of the added burden of domestic responsibilities alongside their professional duties, which intensified their overall stress. These pressures, rooted in traditional family structures and established gender roles, are more pronounced in the Iranian cultural context and differ from similar experiences in Western societies. On the other hand, some participants demonstrated a notable capacity to adapt to the new circumstances and even discovered growth opportunities. The adoption of innovative teaching methods, flexibility in instructional approaches, and the enhancement of digital literacy skills reflected a form of professional resilience that was supported both institutionally and individually. Although the shift was unplanned, it allowed some faculty members to redefine their professional identities and develop new competencies.

The results of this study offer several practical implications for university administrators and policymakers in higher education. First, the psychological and professional well-being of faculty members during crises requires a holistic approach. Universities should design and implement culturally sensitive support systems that include mental health services, peer support networks, and counseling options tailored to the local context. Second, faculty development programs must include training in coping skills such as cognitive reframing, emotion regulation, and the use of spiritual resources. Enhancing faculty members' capacity to manage stress and adapt to changing conditions will not only safeguard their individual well-being but also strengthen the coherence and effectiveness of the educational system as a whole. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of institutional flexibility. Supporting hybrid teaching models, adjusting workloads based on individual circumstances, and fostering open, bidirectional communication between administrators and faculty can all contribute to the resilience of academic institutions. Such measures will better prepare universities to face future crises and create a more sustainable foundation for educational quality and the mental health of their academic community.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most significant health crises of recent decades, has profoundly affected various sectors of human life, including higher education. A new strain of the virus, named COVID-19, emerged as a contagious infection in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Mohan & Vinod, 2020). The disease rapidly spread across China and then to other parts of the globe (Wickramasinghe et al., 2020). COVID-19 spreads through inhalation of droplets from sneezing or by hand contact, leading to contamination of mucous membranes in the mouth, nose, or eyes (Liu et al., 2020).

Symptoms of COVID١٩- include cough, fever, and acute respiratory infection, which have led to severe consequences globally (Singhal, 2020). Beyond physical symptoms, such health crises can significantly affect psychological functioning by fostering cognitive distortions and impacting individuals' thoughts and behaviors (Akbari Chermahini et al., 2022). Infected individuals may also suffer from a range of psychosocial

consequences, including fear of death, depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, stigma, and weakened family communication, all of which substantially reduce their quality of life (Aliakbari Dehkordi et al., 2020).

By November 2020, the virus had led to over 58 million confirmed cases and more than 1 million deaths globally (Ozamiz-Etxebarria, 2021). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, educational systems worldwide faced unprecedented changes. One critical measure taken was the closure of educational institutions, affecting approximately 70% of global education systems (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). Depending on location, students either continued face-to-face education, switched to remote learning, or adopted a hybrid model. Instruction rapidly shifted to digital platforms and virtual environments provided by educational institutions (Mishra et al., 2020). However, while both universities and professors increasingly relied on digital tools for teaching and communication, little is known about the factors that help teachers feel confident in their ability to teach effectively from home. Some educators, equipped with internet skills and videoconferencing tools, adjusted relatively well, while others, encountering distance learning for the first time, found it challenging (Quezada, 2020; Tan et al., 2025).

The transition's impact varied significantly based on instructors' skills and familiarity with technology; while some welcomed the change, others found it irrelevant or stressful (Drossel, 2019). For those experiencing stress, the shift in teaching practices posed a considerable mental health burden (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Research indicates that COVID-19 has had detrimental effects on emotional and social functioning (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Bozbayındır & Akalın, 2025) and increased vulnerability to mental health challenges, including suicidal ideation (Gunnell et al., 2020).

Despite substantial research on the economic, unemployment, and psychological impacts of COVID-19, few studies have explored the pandemic's specific effects on university faculty members, particularly in Iran, where educators have had to adapt teaching methods under forced conditions with limited student interaction. Research has highlighted how COVID-19 has impacted motivation, stress, and job satisfaction among educators. For instance, Kim & Chio (2016) noted an increase in job stress during previous coronavirus outbreaks, while Panisora et al. (2020) reported that the pandemic affected educators' motivation, contributing to burnout.

The COVID-19 crisis has introduced profound stressors that threaten multiple dimensions of academic life, including work routines, research productivity, and faculty well-being. While the immediate effects of the pandemic may eventually diminish, its long-term implications for higher education remain uncertain. This study is important not only for understanding the specific disruptions caused by COVID-19 but also for shedding light on the broader vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities within academic systems. By examining the lived experiences of faculty members in Iran, the study offers valuable insights into how institutions can foster resilience, develop responsive support systems, and better prepare for future crises. It therefore seeks to answer the central question: How has the COVID-19 outbreak affected university faculty members in Shahrekord University?

Method

Participants and Procedure

This phenomenological qualitative study explored the lived experiences of university faculty members impacted

by COVID-19. The choice of a qualitative approach was driven by the need to understand the psychosocial and professional challenges faced by professors during the pandemic, an area with limited prior research. Phenomenology was employed to uncover subjective meanings and insights from participants' experiences, revealing thematic categories that reflect the diversity of their perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The target population consisted of university faculty members at Shahrekord University who were actively teaching during the 2021-2022 academic year.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit 12 faculty members from Shahrekord University, selected to achieve theoretical saturation. The participants (9 men and three women) had a mean age of 43.23 years (SD = 4.50). Eligibility criteria included: (1) current employment at an accredited university in Shahrekord, (2) holding a formal or contractual teaching role, (3) a minimum of three years of teaching experience, (4) active engagement in teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (5) experience with online or hybrid instructional formats. Faculty with less than three years of experience or limited student interaction during the pandemic were excluded from the study.

Ethical statement

In this study, ethical considerations were prioritized, including the confidentiality of participants' information and obtaining informed consent. Additionally, the study received ethical approval, with the ID IR.SKU.REC.1400.038, from the ethics committee of Shahrekord University.

Measures

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews designed to explore faculty members' subjective experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview guide was developed based on a preliminary review of the literature on academic stressors, pandemic-related disruptions, and coping strategies. To ensure content validity, the questions were reviewed and refined by three experts in qualitative research and higher education. Their feedback helped align the questions with the study's aims and enhance their clarity and relevance.

The interview protocol focused on four broad areas: 1. perceptions and emotional responses to the pandemic, 2. impacts on personal and professional life, 3. contextual factors influencing their experiences, and 4. coping mechanisms used during this time.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling from faculty members at Shahrekord University, ensuring variation in gender, academic rank, and discipline. Twelve participants took part in interviews conducted between October and January 2021. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet setting to ensure depth and comfort. To ensure credibility, several strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted with four participants, who were provided with summaries of their interviews to review and confirm the accuracy and resonance of the content with their actual experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Marshall and Rossman's (2014) reductionist and interpretive framework. After transcribing the interviews, initial codes were derived inductively. These codes were iteratively clustered into subthemes and broader categories, informed by constant comparison and thematic saturation. Theme selection was grounded in both frequencies of mention and conceptual richness, with attention to capturing both commonalities and variations across participants' narratives.

Results

The interview analysis revealed that the effects of COVID-19 on university faculty members could be categorized into two main domains: occupational impacts and psychological effects. The occupational domain includes themes such as research activities, teaching challenges, burnout, and career development, while the psychological domain encompasses anxiety, fear of illness, and depression. Faculty members also employed various coping strategies to deal with the pandemic, which were classified into six key areas: social interactions, religious practices, diverse teaching methods, campus-based classes, physical exercise, and cognitive strategies. Below, these categories and subcategories are discussed in detail.

Table 1. Perceived Effects of COVID-19 on Faculty Members

Impact Domain	Subcategory	Number of Participants Affected	Example Quotes
Occupational	Research Activities	5	"My research activities were very limited initially... but later, as I adapted to the situation, the quality of my work improved."
	Teaching Challenges	7	"We introduced more resources, including videos and digital materials, which allowed students to access content at their convenience."
	Burnout	3	"The workload has become overwhelming, and I feel less enthusiastic about my job than before."
	Career Development	4	"The pandemic prevented me from attending important scientific conferences, and I even missed potential study opportunities."
Psychological	Anxiety	8	"My life is still filled with anxiety, and I find myself constantly worrying."
	Fear of Illness	8	"I was very fearful whenever cases spiked... I was afraid that my family could get infected."
	Depression	6	"My social interactions dropped drastically, and for a while, I felt truly depressed."

Table 1 summarizes the main occupational and psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on faculty members, as reported by participants. Each subcategory includes the number of individuals affected and representative quotes to illustrate their experiences.

Occupational Domain

1. **Research Activities**

   Participants reported both positive and negative effects on their research activities due to physical distancing and the transition to remote work. Some participants expressed a decline in motivation and productivity, while others found improvements in the quality of their research. For instance, one participant noted, "My research activities were very limited initially... but later, as I adapted to the situation, the quality of my work improved." This finding suggests that while some faculty members struggled with the adjustment to remote work, others took advantage of the isolation to enhance the depth of their research.

2. **Teaching Challenges**

   The shift to online education brought mixed responses. Seven participants (out of 12) felt that

the quality of education declined due to reduced interaction with students, while five participants highlighted the flexibility of online learning, particularly for motivated students. One participant commented, "... we introduced more resources, including videos and digital materials, which allowed students to access content at their convenience." This implies that although online education posed challenges for some, others adapted by utilizing more diverse resources to enhance learning.

3. **Burnout**

   Faculty members reported experiencing burnout, driven by increased workload and stress. Three participants mentioned feeling fatigued and less enthusiastic about their work due to the constant adjustment required during the pandemic. As one participant expressed, "... the workload has become overwhelming, and I feel less enthusiastic about my job than before." This highlights the strain that faculty members faced as they navigated the demands of teaching and maintaining academic productivity.

4. **Career Development**

   Public gathering restrictions during the pandemic hindered professional development opportunities for many faculty members. Four participants noted that they missed out on opportunities for attending conferences and workshops, which they viewed as vital for career progression. One participant shared, "... the pandemic prevented me from attending important scientific conferences, and I even missed potential study opportunities." This suggests that the professional development of faculty members was severely limited by the restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

Psychological Effects

1. **Anxiety**

   Anxiety was a pervasive psychological effect among faculty members. All participants experienced varying levels of anxiety, with eight reporting higher levels, especially those personally affected by COVID-19. As one participant shared, "... my life is still filled with anxiety, and I find myself constantly worrying." This finding suggests that the uncertainty and fear associated with the pandemic had a significant impact on the mental health of faculty members.

2. **Fear of Illness**

   A common theme among participants was the fear of contracting COVID-19, with eight participants reporting heightened fear, often intensified by media coverage of the virus. One participant noted, "... I was very fearful whenever cases spiked... I was afraid that my family could get infected." This demonstrates the pervasive fear of illness that affected not only faculty members themselves but also their families.

3. **Depression**

   Six participants reported experiencing symptoms of depression, often linked to reduced social interactions and feelings of isolation. One participant mentioned, "... my social interactions dropped drastically, and for a while, I felt truly depressed." This highlights the mental health challenges faced by faculty members, particularly those who were isolated due to social distancing measures.

Table 2. Coping Strategies Employed by Faculty Members

Coping Strategy	Number of Participants	Example Quotes
Social Interactions	3	"Having a few close friends around really made us feel less anxious and fearful."
Religious Practices	2	"Whenever I felt fearful, praying provided me with a deep sense of calm."
Diverse Teaching Methods	3	"Using WhatsApp and other online platforms allowed students to learn on their own schedule, which helped lessen my stress."
On-Campus Classes	3	"Being in the classroom, even occasionally, allowed me to feel connected to my role as a professor."
Physical Exercise	5	"Walking daily helped me cope with the situation and provided a break from the stress."
Cognitive Strategies	4	"Constantly reminding myself that the pandemic would eventually end helped me stay resilient."

Table 2 presents the coping strategies employed by faculty members to manage the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategies vary from social and religious practices to pedagogical adaptations and personal resilience techniques, with illustrative quotes reflecting individual experiences.

1. **Social Interactions:**
   Three participants mentioned that maintaining friendships and social interactions helped them cope with the emotional challenges of the pandemic. One participant said, "... having a few close friends around really made us feel less anxious and fearful." This suggests that social support played an important role in helping faculty members manage the stress caused by the pandemic.
2. **Religious Practices:**
   Two participants found solace in prayer and other religious practices. They explained, "... whenever I felt fearful, praying provided me with a deep sense of calm." This highlights the role of spirituality and religious practices in providing comfort and reducing anxiety during challenging times.
3. **Diverse Teaching Methods:**
   Three participants adapted their teaching methods to make learning more engaging and less stressful. As one faculty member explained, "... using WhatsApp and other online platforms allowed students to learn on their own schedule, which helped lessen my stress." This indicates that adopting flexible teaching strategies contributed to reducing burnout and stress among faculty members.
4. **On-Campus Classes:**

Three participants maintained a sense of continuity in their professional roles by holding occasional classes on campus. One participant noted, "... being in the classroom, even occasionally, allowed me to feel connected to my role as a professor." This suggests that in-person interactions, even on a .limited basis, helped faculty members feel more grounded in their professional identity

5. **Physical Exercise:**
   Physical activity emerged as a key coping strategy for five participants, who reported that regular exercise, such as walking or home workouts, helped alleviate negative emotions. One participant shared, "... walking daily helped me cope with the situation and provided a break from the stress." This emphasizes the importance of physical activity in managing stress and maintaining mental health during the pandemic.

6. **Cognitive Strategies:**
   Four participants employed cognitive strategies, such as positive thinking and reframing stressful situations, to maintain emotional stability. As one participant shared, "... constantly reminding myself that the pandemic would eventually end helped me stay resilient." This indicates that cognitive reframing was an effective tool for managing the psychological impact of the pandemic.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on university professors. The analysis of the interviews revealed a broad range of occupational and psychological impacts, which align with existing research on the subject (Al Miskry et al., 2021; Giorgi et al., 2020). As COVID-19 is a contagious disease, the factors associated with transmission risks, preventive measures, and lockdowns have contributed to various mental health challenges. Issues such as inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE), mask-wearing, fears of contagion, increased working hours, and job-related stress have significantly affected the psychological well-being of professors. Consequently, many professors experienced behavioral, physical, and psychological issues, including diminished mood, loss of motivation, and feelings of isolation.

The psychological impacts, notably anxiety, fear of illness, and depression, were among the most significant challenges faced by university professors during the pandemic. As indicated by previous studies (Koçak et al., 2021; Ma & Nee, 2025), fear of contracting the virus, combined with the uncertainty and constant threat of infection, exacerbated mental health issues. Professors expressed heightened levels of anxiety, particularly those who had direct encounters with the virus or its effects within their families. It aligns with the findings of Giorgi et al. (2020), who reported that healthcare and academic professionals experienced substantial stress due to the continuous health risks and changes in their daily working conditions.

The shift to online teaching created further psychological strain. Despite the availability of digital tools, the rapid transition to online learning presented various challenges. Most participants in this study reported difficulties with online engagement, technical issues, and a sense of disconnection from their students. These findings align with Dhawan's (2020) observation that virtual learning, although efficient in many cases, can lead to a lack of personal interaction and increased feelings of isolation among both students and instructors. The shift to remote education also forced professors to adapt quickly to new technologies and teaching methods, which in some cases led to burnout due to increased workload and the steep learning curve.

To mitigate the negative impacts of COVID19-, professors employed a variety of coping strategies. These strategies were categorized into six main areas: social interaction, religious practices, diverse teaching methods, campus-based classes, physical exercise, and cognitive strategies. These findings align with research by Ayebi-Arthur (2017), Tindle et al (2024), and Al-Wardat et al. (2024), who noted that social support, physical activity, and emotional regulation techniques are commonly used coping mechanisms during times of crisis.

The importance of social interaction was highlighted by participants who reported that maintaining close relationships with trusted friends helped alleviate anxiety and fear. The role of social support in mitigating mental health issues during crises is well-documented (Ortiz-Calvo et al, 2022). The sense of community and emotional connections created a buffer against the stress caused by isolation.

Religious practices served as another significant coping mechanism. Two participants specifically mentioned that prayer provided them with a sense of peace during times of uncertainty. This finding aligns with studies that have demonstrated the effectiveness of religious coping mechanisms, such as prayer, in maintaining psychological resilience during stressful events (Pargament et al., 1998). These practices provided a sense of control and comfort in the face of an uncontrollable global crisis.

Adopting diverse teaching methods was another strategy that helped reduce burnout. Participants reported that utilizing a mix of online platforms and resources allowed them to engage students in more flexible and innovative ways. Previous research has shown that employing varied instructional strategies can mitigate the adverse effects of remote teaching by enhancing engagement and reducing teacher fatigue (Hodges et al., 2020). By diversifying teaching methods, professors not only maintained their own interest but also catered to the varied learning needs of students.

The ability to hold occasional classes on campus was crucial for some participants in maintaining their professional identity and a sense of continuity. This finding aligns with the existing literature on the importance of in-person interaction in higher education. Having physical presence in the classroom helped professors to feel more connected to their teaching roles and provided a sense of normalcy during the pandemic (González et al., 2021).

Five participants cited physical exercise as a crucial strategy for reducing stress and enhancing mood. Physical activity has been shown to alleviate anxiety and depression, enhancing both physical and psychological well-being (Rebar et al., 2015). Simple activities, such as walking or doing home exercises, provided a temporary escape from the pressures of remote work and helped professors cope with the prolonged period of isolation.

Cognitive strategies, including reframing and maintaining a positive outlook, were used by many participants to stay resilient. The ability to reframe stressful situations and focus on the eventual end of the pandemic helped many professors avoid burnout and maintain emotional stability. This approach is consistent with the cognitive-behavioral theory, which emphasizes the importance of cognitive restructuring in managing stress (Beck et al., 2011).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on both the occupational and psychological well-being of university professors. The findings underscore the importance of support systems, both social and professional, in helping faculty cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic. By understanding these challenges and developing effective coping mechanisms, universities can better prepare for future crises and establish more robust support systems for their faculty members. At the policy level, the results call for a shift toward more flexible and responsive structures within Iran's higher education system. Policymakers and university administrators should prioritize the mental health and professional development of faculty by institutionalizing psychological services, promoting hybrid teaching models, and providing equitable access to digital infrastructure and training. Such initiatives can enhance faculty resilience, safeguard educational quality, and ensure the continuity and adaptability of higher education in times of crisis.

While this study provides valuable insights into the psychological and professional impacts of COVID-19 on university faculty members, it has several limitations. The small and homogeneous sample, drawn from a single university, restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, challenges in recruiting participants

during the pandemic may have influenced the depth and diversity of the data.

To enhance the validity and applicability of these findings, future studies should consider employing larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions. The integration of quantitative approaches alongside qualitative ones could help confirm and expand upon these results. Furthermore, longitudinal research is recommended to examine the lasting effects of pandemics on the mental health and professional trajectories of faculty members.

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