

Student Experience and Reactions to Online Learning on Facebook: A Content Analysis of Remote Learning Issues during COVID-19

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Date Submitted: December 5, 2022

Keywords: Remote learning, COVID-19, student feedback, experience, overload, burnout, Facebook.

Abstract

This study examined the complications of remote learning experienced by MacEwan University students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Content analyses of 125 comments to a Facebook post about remote learning revealed 5 key themes including: work overload, professor issues, disorganized system, burnout, and a concern with fees. The most prevalent themes were work overload (35.2% of comments) and professor issues (28.0%). Further analyses showed that students were most challenged by weekly assignments and readings occurring in all of their classes simultaneously. This study sheds insight into student experiences with at-home learning and suggests instructors need to modify their approaches to remote learning practices to ensure the workload is not beyond the capacities of what students would typically experience in person.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted learning techniques worldwide, as institutions transition from in-person to remote teaching. University students are impacted by the global health crisis, as they learn to navigate the online world of schooling. Students reported their struggles online through social media as a platform to express their concerns and views. Pre-existing literature investigated the implications of remote learning on university students by surveying students on their individual experiences of the transition of learning strategies, and its effect on their mental health and academic success.

Investigating concerns about remote learning, Gonzalez-Ramirez, Mulqueen, Zealand, Silverstein, Mulqueen, and BuShell (2021) explored complications students reported about their online experiences. Through an email invitation survey, student feedback indicated that

connectivity issues, decreased motivation, lack of healthy habits, finances and lack of social connections resulted from online learning processes (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021, p. 1).

In addition, Al-Mawee, Kwayu, and Gharaibeh (2021) discuss student learning experiences, providing suggestions for schools to offer improved online learning techniques, alluding to student success. Administered through an online survey, students provided feedback on distance learning and the instruction methods of professors. As a result, student perceptions inquired about problems of tools and methods utilized by instructors alongside isolation obstacles (Al-Mawee et al., 2021 p. 2).

Contributing information to the study, Lorio, Galen, Morelli, and Gore (2021) assessed the impact shifting from in-person classes to online learning has on students, focusing on student exam score differentials and questioning students of their thoughts. The survey and exam score difference revealed that 83% of students did not learn as effectively as they would have if they were in person, reporting it was due to work overload and burnout (Lorio et al., 2021, p. 234).

Taking research back to the start of the pandemic, Biber, Melton, and Czech (2020) investigated the influence of online learning on students' mental health and satisfaction through online surveys. The findings gathered from the cross-sectional descriptive study illustrate the negative correlation between anxiety, optimism and gratitude from professor instruction and guidance (Biber et al., 2020, p. 1947). Furthermore, Biber, Melton, and Czech (2020) concluded that the results informed educators on the importance of educational practices that are effective, and proper coping strategies for students to utilize for online learning success.

Overall, previous literature revealed the effects of remote learning on students, the impact it has on mental health, academic success, and student lack of relationships; thus, through surveys, the findings contributed to university alterations to provide improved learning to

students. This study aims to conduct a content analysis on a Facebook post to further investigate and specify student perceptions about remote learning by analyzing student discussion and online feedback. The opinions of students posted online advance current knowledge of remote learning as student feedback online is raw, unfiltered, and showcases the truth of the subject matter that surveys are limited to accessing. The COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, and online learning is partially ongoing and can be revisited; therefore, information from this study can help students and faculty in the future. This research study will focus on how MacEwan University's online learning sector impacted students during the COVID-19 pandemic to demonstrate a reinforcement of previous findings and to create new discoveries.

Methods

Sample

The sample for this content analysis includes 125 comments under a Facebook post related to issues students at MacEwan experienced from the switch to remote learning. The Facebook post was created by a MacEwan University student on September 25, 2020, and posted to a private group page titled, “MacEwan University Student Experience.” The post asks students to comment on their concerns, struggles and any changes they wish to see with remote learning techniques.

Sample Selection

Facebook is a networking app that allows individuals to connect, and share photos, thoughts, and opinions with anyone who accesses the site. The selection of Facebook for this study was due to it being a popular networking site amongst young adults, in which threads are easily accessible.

For this study, the “MacEwan University Student Experience” Facebook group was chosen as it has the most members, at 7.9 thousand students. A purposive sampling technique was used to determine which post was chosen, using keywords such as ‘remote learning,’ ‘COVID-19,’ and ‘online experience.’ The thread analyzed was chosen as it had the highest number of comments and reactions, illustrating that a wide range of students engaged with the post.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

This content analysis wishes to understand and comprehend the attitudes and views of MacEwan University students in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic forcing students to learn remotely. All 125 comments are included as it provided for a deeper analysis and comprehension of the discussion, thus replies to comments were also included. The reactions to comments made by external students were excluded from this study, and students sharing the post to their pages and gathering further reach from other individuals were also excluded.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this content analysis included words and phrases within all 125 comments that related to student opinions on online learning practices derived from a Facebook post (n=125). All comments were analyzed thoroughly; thus, the gathering of key terms was derived from in-depth analysis.

Setting and Materials

The researcher collected data using a reliable internet source, a laptop, and a Facebook account with access to the private Facebook group. The location of the analysis was the researchers' place of residence.

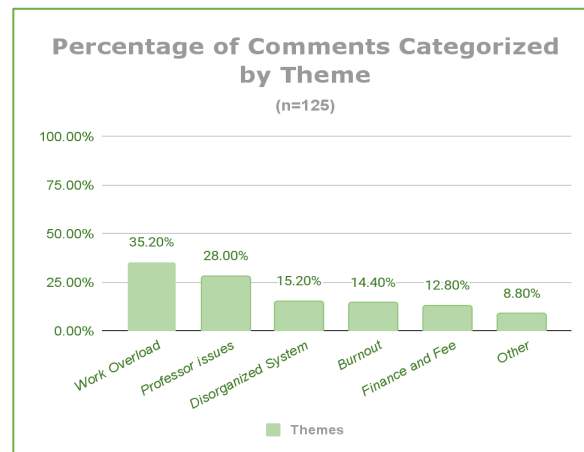
Coding Procedure

Each of the 125 comments was examined, searching for keywords and phrases that illustrated the content of the comment. Comments including multiple keywords that are separate from each other were added to those respective keyword categories, to account for both themes prevalent in the comment. The comments were then re-evaluated further to analyze for more specific themes relating to the main phrase; thus, subcategories were formed.

Results

Results revealed 4 patterns among university students' experience of remote learning: 1) Work Overload, 2) Professor Issues, 3) Disorganized System, 4) Burnout, 5) Fees, and 6) Other (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Comment Themes.



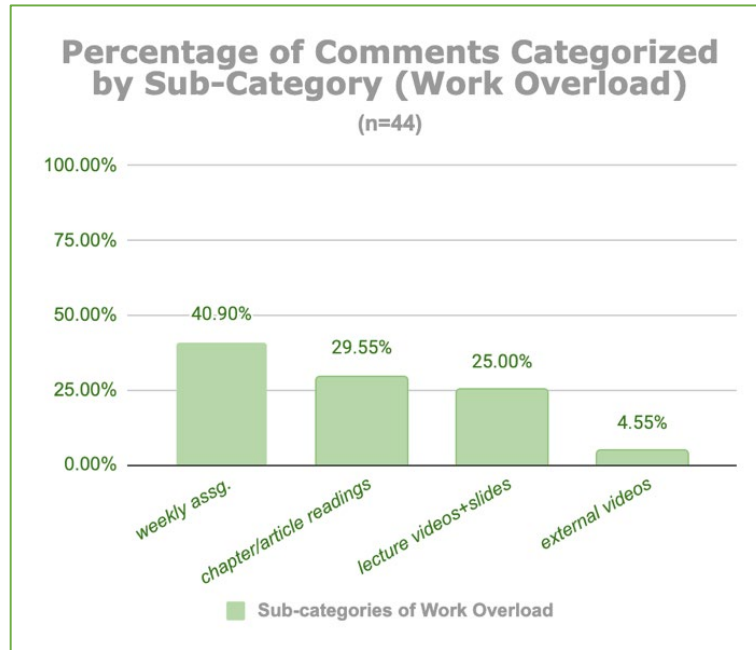
1. Work Overload

Work Overload refers to comments expressing the intensity of the quantity of work professors assigned students. This was the most common theme as it took a weighting of approximately 35.20% of the sample (n=125) (see figure 1). The feedback opened sub-categories of student overload referring specifically to a combination of a) weekly assignments and discussion posts, b) chapter and article readings, b) lecture videos and slides, alongside, d) external Videos.

- a) *Weekly assignments and discussions* refer to the number of assignments required for students to complete within a week. This is the most prevalent sub-category, as 40.90% of the sample (n=44) reported an overwhelming number of weekly assignments (see figure 2). Example comments included, “I have 9 weekly assignments due.”
- b) *Chapter and article readings* are the immense number of readings professors assign to students that relate to student overload. This is the second most common sub-category, with 29.55% of the sample (n=44) reporting their work overload was due to extreme amounts of external readings in addition to their usual course load size (see figure 2). An example includes, “just so many readings...along with textbook AND excerpts of other readings.”
- c) *Lecture videos and slides* refer to the professor assigning lecture notes and multiple lengthy lecture videos a week, leading to accounting for 25.00% of the sample (n=44) (see figure 2). Comments representing this include, “lots of classes that have lectures...there is more slides after the lecture.”
- d) *External videos* refer to the professor's recommendations of YouTube videos on top of their other assigned readings and videos. 4.55% of the sample (n=44) reported videos

contributed to their coursework overload (see figure 2). One example states, “extra videos to watch.”

Figure 2. Sub-category of Work overload.



2. Professor Issues

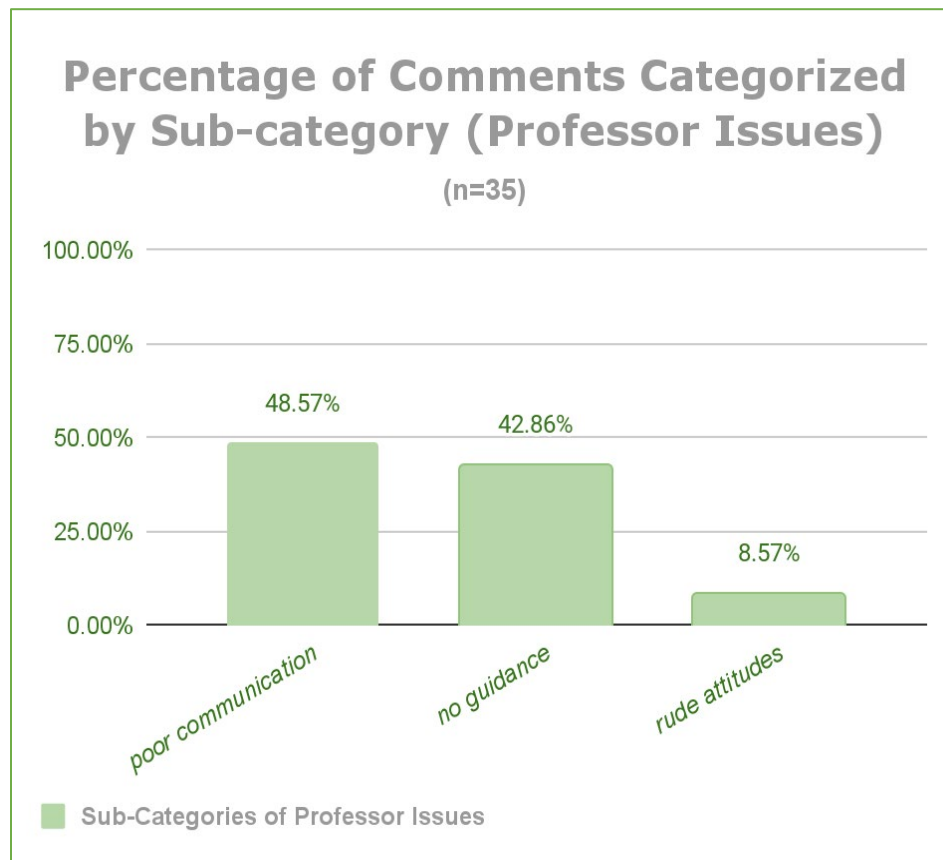
Professor issues refer to the unprofessionalism and poor interaction between professors and students. These comments identified sub-categories of professor issues, including a) poor communication skills, b) no guidance, and c) rude attitude. Professor issues are the second most prevalent theme within student comments, accounting for 28.00% of the sample (n=125) (see figure 1).

- a) *Poor Communication* refers to professors sending late notices, providing unclear instruction, being unresponsive and ignoring emails from students. Lack of communication is most common in the sub-category of professor issues, with 48.57% of

the sample (n=35) identifying communication errors by professors (see figure 3). An example includes, “isn’t communicating or replying to emails.”

- b) *No guidance* illustrates professors’ inability to aid students. 42.86% of the sample (n=35) reported a lack of professor help alluded to their complications with teachers (see figure 3). Comments included appeared as, “little guidance,” and “lack of guidance.”
- c) *Rude attitudes* from professors include comments reflecting unprofessional attitudes, presenting unapproachable language, and addressing students with a lack of respect, representing 8.57% of the sample (n=35) (see figure 3). An example comment includes, “saying we are ungrateful.”

Figure 3. Sub-Category of Professor Issues



3. Disorganized System

Disorganized System refers to the online learning system that MacEwan University utilizes to present course information to students. 15.20% of the sample (n=125), reported complications with unorganized and confusing site set up by professors and system dysfunctionality with errors occurring often (see figure 1). Example comments include, “extremely disorganized,” and “sooo disorganized!”

4. Burnout

Burnout touches on students' mental declination and lack of motivation to achieve successful academic performance due to stress overload. Students illustrated their burnout is reflected by course overload created by professors. Burnout accounted for 14.40% of the sample (n=125) (see figure 1). This is illustrated by comments including, “I’m already feeling burnt out,” and “I’m burnt out.”

5. Fees

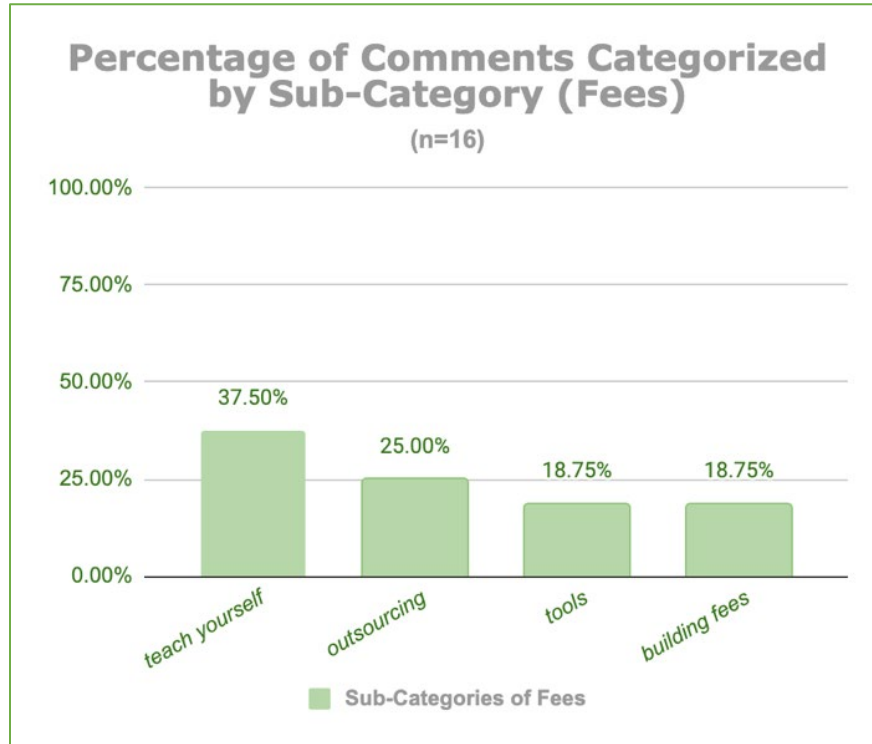
Fees involve student stress and unease with the school fees alluding to financial issues. Sub-categories found within include, a) paying to teach yourself, b) course outsourcing, c) tools and materials, and d) building fees. Issues with the university fees accounted for 12.80% of the sample (n=125) (see figure 1).

- a) *Teach yourself* refers to student unease with having to teach themselves the content professors release to students online. Students in this sub-category express their apprehensiveness with paying to be taught by professors although they do not teach

students during online learning. The most prevalent sub-category accounted for 37% of the sample (n=16) (see figure 4). An example includes, “I’m paying them to teach me and instead, I’m making my own notes.”

- b) *Outsourcing* refers to a professor requiring students to purchase a third-party online source to supply students with information and online resources. Third-party student memberships include databases such as TopHat and Revel. Students’ express unhappiness about purchasing memberships when information could be provided through the school's online system by professors. This sub-category is top two for being the most prevalent theme, accounting for 25.00% of the sample (n=16) (see figure 4). Examples include, “programs we have to pay extra for.”
- c) *Tools* account for external materials and tools students pay for to access and uphold remote learning; this includes purchasing improved Wi-Fi connectivity routers, durable headphones, and other learning tools. Tools account for 18.75% of the sample (n=16) (see figure 4). An example illustrates, “I’m a broke student who now pays double for internet just so I can watch the lectures reliably.”
- d) *Building Fees*, accounting for 18.75% of the sample (n=16), referring to MacEwan University’s mandatory fees, regardless of the inability to utilize the paid programs due to remote learning (see figure 4). Mandatory fees for the building include Sports and Wellness, Technology, SAMU building and ARC U pass fees. An example is “Why would I pay a gym fee,” and “don’t find it fair to be paying for something I don’t or can not even use.”

Figure 4. Sub-Category of Fees



6. Other

Other refers to miscellaneous comments that stand separate from the common themes presented throughout the comments. These comments discuss mental health deterioration, lack of social interaction, inability to build relations with professors to further aid their career, and instability in balancing work, life, school, and relationships. This section covers 8.80% of the sample (n=125) (see figure 1). The variety of comments includes, “I have two children, two jobs, and full-time school,” and “other obligations like family and jobs,” alongside, “I’m sacrificing social life and hobbies.”

Table 1. Examples of Comments by Each Category and Sub-Category

| Category and Sub-Category | Comments |
|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. Work Overload | |
| a. Weekly assignments | <p>“Homework/assignments is too much.”</p> <p>“Too many assignments.”</p> |
| b. Chapter/article readings | <p>“The amount of readings.”</p> <p>“The amount of reading and time they are asking us to put into each course is absolutely ridiculous.”</p> |
| c. Lecture videos and slides | <p>“Literally a novel within her slide to provide extra information.”</p> <p>“Power points, and slides. Way too much.”</p> |
| d. External videos | <p>“Adds additional YouTube videos to her PowerPoints for extra information.”</p> <p>“Watch videos when she could have just used blackboard and lectures.”</p> |
| 2. Professor Issues | |
| a. Poor Communication | <p>“No fair communication for some, not being able to ask immediate questions really sucks.”</p> <p>“As for communication, it’s extremely frustrating to be told last minute about changes or assignments.”</p> |
| b. No Guidance | <p>“Not enough guidance.”</p> <p>“Without any literal context or guidance.”</p> |
| c. Rude attitudes | <p>“Saying we were ungrateful.”</p> <p>“Address a student very poorly.”</p> <p>“Email me once at the beginning of the semester and then never speak to us again.”</p> |
| 3. Disorganized System | <p>“Students feel overwhelmed by how disorganized it is.”</p> <p>“Is really disorganized, I find myself clicking around and hoping it’ll take me to where I need to go.”</p> |

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| 4. Burnout | <p>“The first 3 weeks have me burning out already!”</p> <p>“I’m burnt out and overwhelmed.”</p> |
| 5. Fees | |
| a. Teach Yourself | <p>“We can’t hear our profs then what are we paying for?”</p> <p>“I’m paying them to teach me and instead I’m making my own notes with little guidance of what’s important/what should be focused on.”</p> |
| b. Outsourcing | <p>“I have to pay extra to use revel to submit quizzes and watch videos.”</p> <p>“Teaching us to online modules and programs we have to pay extra for.”</p> |
| c. Tools | <p>“Pays double for internet just so I can watch the lectures reliably.”</p> |
| d. Building Fees | <p>“Don’t find it fair to be paying for something I don’t or can not even use.”</p> <p>“Making part time students pay for the sports and wellness, specially in the Covid situation is getting too much.”</p> |
| 6. Other | <p>“Other obligations like family and jobs.”</p> <p>“It makes it hard to plan for work and other commitments.”</p> <p>“My anxiety is at its worst.”</p> <p>“I’m sacrificing social life and hobbies.”</p> |

Discussion

Comments on a Facebook post to a group specified for MacEwan University students revealed themes and patterns that illustrated student reflections on the COVID-19 global health crisis converting in-person learning to remote learning. Despite the unease students experienced, they expressed their shared concerns to relate to each other and keep a positive headspace whilst resonating with the drastic transition to online learning. This content analysis uncovered MacEwan University students' experience and their identification of issues with remote learning, and thus, 125 comments to a post made by a MacEwan student illustrate the following categories

as prevalent issues: 1) work overload, 2) professor issues, 3) disorganized system, 4) burnout, 5) fees, and 6) other. The results are important in revalidating previous literature while also uncovering through sub-categories the specifics of why students have issues with remote teaching.

The results revealed that work overload was the main commonality among students' reports of online learning issues. Gonzalez-Ramirez, Mulqueen, Zealand, Silverstein, Mulqueen, and BuShell (2021) touched briefly on the workload that students experienced, concluding on its impact on students' motivations and habits. Furthermore, this content analysis adds information to the multiple ways in which students experienced work overload, revealing specifically the root of where the overload occurred. These sub-categories included: 1) weekly assignments, 2) chapter and article readings, 3) lecture videos and slides, and 4) external videos. This knowledge provides information to faculty on the problems of remote teaching, concluding the main issue reported for students is the amount of work assigned, and the specific types of work assigned; thus, faculty can rearrange their services to help aid students in the future to prevent the fluctuation of student burnout. To revalidate these findings, Al-Mawee, Kwayu, and Gharaibeh (2021) suggested that distance learning requires learning tools to be altered to provide better accommodations for student learning as the study recognized issues with professor teaching methods, therefore recommending schools offer professional advancement opportunities for professors. Adding to student-professor complications, this content analysis identified these issues as the second most common in student reports. Although Al-Mawee, Kwayu, and Gharaibeh (2021) made recommendations to avoid professor issues, his study and previous literature failed to acknowledge how issues arise and how prevalent they are; therefore, the

information in this study is beneficiary to university systems, as they can serve professors better equipped to deal with students during online learning moving forward.

Biber, Melton, and Czech (2020) identified the impact and correlation between anxiety, optimism, gratitude, and course satisfaction, concluding the relationship between school and these categories. The study emphasized the importance of coping strategies for students dealing with stress and overwhelm (Biber et al., 2020, p. 1949). Information that Biber, Melton, and Czech failed to identify was in what ways do students feel burnout and stress. The findings of this study contributed sub-categories to this idea; thus, combining Biber, Melton, and Czech's findings and this content analysis can further understand how and why students report exhaustion.

Additionally, this content analysis identified fees as issues students reported during the health crisis. Reinforcing these findings, Gonzalez-Ramirez, Mulqueen, Zealand, Silverstein, Mulqueen, and BuShell (2021) discovered issues of remote learning stemmed from Wi-Fi quality and finances, which this content analysis also identified. Furthermore, this content analysis further explained student issues with finances and fees, specificizing on the exact fees with which students had concerns with. Understanding the specifics of student issues with fees can influence university faculty to alter or change their fees according to student feedback.

An interesting flaw of previous literature involved the identification of the generalizability of the results, as Lorio, Galen, Morelli, and Gore (2021) identified as a flaw in the study conducted. As a result, the literature revealed surface-level issues which this content analysis solved. The researcher in this study identified this limitation and fixed the issue as the researcher analyzed the findings thoroughly, dividing findings into sub-categories, allowing for

deepened understanding. This enhanced analysis acknowledges the root causes for the reason why students reported the issues they did.

Limitations

As all research has limitations, this content analysis undergoes limits and is addressed to influence future research.

First, the sample gathered comments from a post dated 2020; although these issues and topics discovered are still prevalent, they are not current.

Secondly, the study did not fully analyze all data presented, as Facebook has a react feature, in which other students who did not post their experiences in the comments, reacted to comments with a thumbs up or a heart, indicating their agreement with the issue contained in the comment. This limits the content, which was analyzed, with the missed opportunity to further gather student input by including the reactions to comments.

Third, Facebook has limitations with what can be said and posted within a group, as certain words, phrases, and the specific content within the post can be censored or flagged, thus being removed, and limiting any verbose or elicited information that could have presented deeper into the themes and categories of this study.

Lastly, the Facebook group in specific, of which the post was derived, is private, and only a select number of students are allowed to join the group. As not every MacEwan student is involved in or has a Facebook account, it limits the amount of reach the post could have gotten and limits the comment section's student experiences to those involved in the group only.

Although this study solved previous works of literatures limitations, there are still limitations to this study. Acknowledgement of these limitations can aid future research to combat

these limitations and curate wider evidence that this content analysis failed to address. By analyzing a current-day post, including all reactions and comments, and using a more widespread, easily accessible source, findings can curate greater results.

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