

AUTHOR:

Dr Sarina de Jager¹ 

AFFILIATION:

¹University of Pretoria,
South AfricaDOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v41i1.6140>

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Connection, desperation and disillusionment: Exploring student wellbeing at a university in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic

Abstract

University students' mental health and wellbeing has been a global public health issue of increasing concern in recent years, with a growing body of empirical evidence suggesting university students are a 'very high-risk population' for mental disorders and psychological distress. Pre-existing mental health challenges among university students have consequently been compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic. A sample of 20 students registered in the education faculty at a large urban university in South Africa participated in a Photovoice study. The research required them to capture three photos or images of their experiences of wellbeing during the pandemic. The findings showed that students experienced mental health concerns and disillusionment with higher education. Their wellbeing was associated with a sense of connection with themselves, their peers and the campus space, and the cultivation of resilience.

Keywords: *Wellbeing; COVID-19; Photovoice; PERMA model; Higher Education*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the mental health of university students has become a pressing public health concern. Empirical evidence indicates that this population is at a heightened risk for experiencing mental disorders and psychological distress, warranting urgent attention (Baik, Larcombe & Brooker, 2019; Lister, Seale & Douce, 2021). Pre-existing mental health and wellbeing challenges among university students have subsequently been exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic; data from the United Kingdom suggest that the number of students stating a mental health disorder upon entering university has increased significantly within the last three years (Morgan & Simmons, 2021; Hawkins, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health of students worldwide. Research conducted by the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States found that during the pandemic, individuals experienced high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (CDC, 2020). A study conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) also revealed that the pandemic had caused a national mental health crisis (APA, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) has also highlighted the negative impact of the pandemic on mental health and wellbeing (WHO, 2021).

Research from developing countries seems to paint a concerning picture, estimating that “12 to 46 percent of students at university experience mental health problems” (Auerbach et al., 2018; Harrer et al., 2019). A study conducted in Brazil found that students experienced high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression during the pandemic (Bezerra et al., 2021). Another study conducted in South Africa found that the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms among university students increased significantly during the pandemic (Naidoo et al., 2021). Financial stress has also been a significant issue for students in the global south and southern Africa during the pandemic. A study conducted in Nigeria found that financial stress was a significant predictor of poor mental health outcomes among students (Ojediran & Emeke, 2021). Furthermore, in the global south and southern Africa, mental health services are frequently constrained or unavailable, and the pandemic has further amplified this issue. A study conducted in Ghana found that students had limited access to mental health services and that those who did have access to services reported low satisfaction with the quality of care (Tagoe et al., 2020). The pandemic has disrupted academic schedules and shifted learning to online platforms, which has had a significant impact on students’ academic performance. A study conducted in Uganda found that students reported lower academic performance during the pandemic, which was associated with increased stress and anxiety (Kabagenyi et al., 2020).

In South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated existing inequities and increased learning losses for vulnerable students (Eloff, 2021). Findings from a large student mental health survey involving 26 publicly funded universities in South Africa and 29 000 students – which was initiated by Universities South Africa (USAf) in 2022, suggest that 20% of students in higher education institutions in South Africa need mental health support, and of those students, more than 70% are not receiving the support they need (Walker, 2022).

Along with mental health challenges, students also appeared to struggle with disillusionment with higher education institutions during the pandemic. A study conducted by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and YouthSight in the United Kingdom found that the pandemic had led to a significant decline in student wellbeing and motivation, with many students feeling disillusioned and disengaged (Bullivant, 2021). A survey conducted by the National Union of Students (NUS) in the United Kingdom, found that many students felt disillusioned with their university experience during the pandemic, with some feeling that their education had been devalued and their mental health neglected (Paton, 2021). A survey conducted by the International Student Barometer (ISB) found that many international students studying in the United Kingdom during the pandemic felt disillusioned and dissatisfied with their experience, with some questioning the value of their education (Morgan, 2021). A study conducted by researchers at the University of Johannesburg found that many students were disillusioned with online learning during the pandemic, with some feeling that their education had been compromised and that they were not receiving value for money (Phatudi-Mphahlele & Mashele, 2021). This research aimed at exploring and understanding students’ experiences of wellbeing in the education faculty of a large urban university in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study followed a qualitative, arts-informed approach. Photovoice, which emerges from community-based participatory research, is a flexible method that has been employed with culturally diverse groups to understand and address community needs. A sample of 20 students (n=20) was recruited from an education faculty at a large urban university in South Africa. Data were collected over two phases. A sample of students (n=20) was invited to submit three photos that answer the question: "What is your experience of wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic?" This article explores the data which foregrounds the nature of student experiences when it comes to their wellbeing. A more nuanced understanding of student wellbeing can predict how support is structured and facilitated in higher education spaces.

2. Theoretical background

The study's understanding of wellbeing is rooted in Positive Psychology, which situates wellbeing in the hedonic tradition. This tradition highlights constructs such as happiness, satisfaction with life, positive affect, and low negative affect (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Other approaches emphasize that wellbeing requires both hedonic and eudaimonic components, which encompass feeling good and functioning well (Waterman, 2008). Despite divergent perspectives, most approaches acknowledge that wellbeing is multidimensional (Huppert & So, 2013). Within the hedonic tradition, wellbeing is closely related to terms such as happiness and flourishing. The latter is characterized by high levels of mental wellbeing and exemplifies mental health (Seligman, 2011). Seligman's PERMA theory identifies five components of wellbeing, namely positive emotions, engagement, meaning, accomplishment, and positive relationships, which are separately defined and measured but correlated. Seligman distinguishes between wellbeing and flourishing by listing his criteria for flourishing as being in the upper range of positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and positive accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Keyes and Simoes (2012) place wellbeing and flourishing on a spectrum of experiences through the Mental Health Continuum, differentiating between flourishing, languishing, and moderate mental health.

Within this study, the term 'wellbeing' is regarded through the PERMA model framework as proposed by Seligman (2018). This model suggests five unique dimensions of wellbeing that are pursued for their own sake: Positive emotions (characterised by hedonic feelings of happiness); Engagement (including feeling absorbed and engaged in life and positive psychological connections); Positive Relationships (feeling loved, supported and valued by others); Meaning (feeling connected to something greater than oneself and having a sense of purpose); and Accomplishment (having mastery in one's life and making progress towards a goal). All these factors form the acronym PERMA. Within the context of education, both the PERMA model and the concept of flourishing are relevant as they relate to the spectrum of students' experiences.

3. Methodology

A qualitative, arts-informed framework was applied to explore and gain insight into how students at the education faculty of a large urban university experienced wellbeing. What distinguishes arts-informed research are the varied, creative ways of representing individual's experiences and the different depictive mediums of expression that can "effectively enhance the understanding of the human condition and experience" (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018).

The study utilised Photovoice as a data collection strategy; it is a flexible method employed with culturally diverse groups to explore and address community needs (Hergenrather et al., 2009; Moletsane et al., 2007). Arts-informed data collection has increased in popularity as it allows qualitative researchers to explore individuals' sensory, visual, embodied and reflexive experiences from a creative point of view (Brown & Collins, 2018). Photovoice, as a research methodology, provides participants with an opportunity to take various photographs that capture their experiences and present them in group discussions that empower them to reflect on their own strengths and that of the community. They also create critical dialogue, share knowledge about personal issues, and develop and host a platform to present their lived experiences and priorities through photo images, language, and context. In the context of this study, Photovoice was chosen for its potential not only to engage students in analysing issues that affect their lives, but also for its unique and significant element of 'having fun' and using a familiar online platform (Moletsane et al., 2007). Within the context of this study, youth are considered to be the experts of their own lives, and it is therefore important to find a method that effectively engage them in understanding their experiences.

Considering the fact that we live in a digital era, utilising cellphones, and more specifically, their camera capabilities, made sense in collecting data effectively, and using images to capture experiences allowed the participants to reflect deeply on these experiences and to explore their own self-awareness (Maunder & LaMothe, 2020). The subject matter of this study was sensitive in nature and the engagement with image provided a space for students to freely associate with the ideas of wellbeing without feeling pressured. Photos and images allowed the participants to capture experiences that were beyond language and words (Brown & Collins, 2021). This method further promoted collaboration in the research process and provided participants with the agency to "voice" their experiences while presenting deep, meaningful data (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010).

The project required students to take photos or upload images that represent their experiences of wellbeing. Students were encouraged to explore their personal and campus space with this project over the course of two months, the extended time allowed students opportunity for deep reflection and consideration of the images and the meaning they make of them. The images and photos with a brief reflection or description of each photo were submitted via an electronic link and were entirely anonymous. Students were asked to generate a pseudonym for themselves in order for the researcher to recognise which photos belonged to which participant.

The researcher approached students via email and social media platforms. The invitation to the study informed students that the included link would open a questionnaire that would take approximately ten minutes to complete. Once students completed the questionnaire they were invited to further engage in the second phase of the research, where students were asked to upload three images or photos that captured their experiences of wellbeing. Due to the nature of this study, both phases were anonymous. This paper explores only the second phase of the research.

Students who participated all confirmed that they were in possession of a smartphone that had camera capabilities. They had to sort through their photos and identify three that they then shared with the researcher, along with a short narrative description of each photo; responses were captured via Qualtrics. The photos and reflections on each photo were analysed by the researcher. The data set was categorised and coded to be integrated

and thematically organised. Connotation and denotation were applied as methods of interpretation when analysing the photos, followed by open coding. The researcher used Atlas.ti to ensure systematic data management and analysis. The study was conducted at a large urban university in South Africa during the second semester of the year. Twenty students (n=20) proceeded with taking photos and reflecting in their own time over a period of two months. A limitation of the methodology was that due to the anonymous nature of the data collection, there weren't further engagement with the participants for clarification and deeper meaning making.

3.1 Participants

All participants were students registered in the education faculty of a large urban university at the time of data collection (n=20). Participation in this study was voluntary. As described earlier, students were provided with an overview of the project and invited to participate by taking photos of their experiences using their phones. Students could withdraw from the study at any point during the data collection process. Due to the nature of the research, participation was anonymous, and no identifiable details were captured during data collection.

3.2 Data analysis

Data sets were categorised and coded to be integrated and thematically organised. Connotation and denotation were applied as methods of interpretation when analysing the photos, followed by open coding. To ensure systematic data management and analysis, the researcher used computer-based tools.

A systematic visuo-textual analysis framework (Brown & Collins, 2021; Spies, 2022) was used to analyse images and text and to weave together the themes that emerged. This process takes place on two levels. The first level of analysis involves noticing and describing, which entails a focus on details of the object present in the image, the real or literal meaning conveyed by the image. The second level of analysis involved conceptualisation of the images and text. Barthes (1977) describe this process of connotation as the social or value-laden implications of the denotation. At this level, semiotic analysis was employed, which in qualitative research is concerned with conceptual meaning derived from the images and how the meaning is produced (Buhigiro & Wassermann, 2017; Manning, 2004). The method of denotation and connotation intends to interpret a phenomenon being studied that cannot be entirely understood in its intricacy through textual interpretation alone. This study applied an inductive category procedure (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018) that avoided the use of preconceived categories and allowed codes to form categories. Names for categories also flowed from the data.

The data sets are presented here in a semi-narrative format to create an in-depth understanding of students' experiences of wellbeing. The study foregrounds individual students' interpretations of wellbeing.

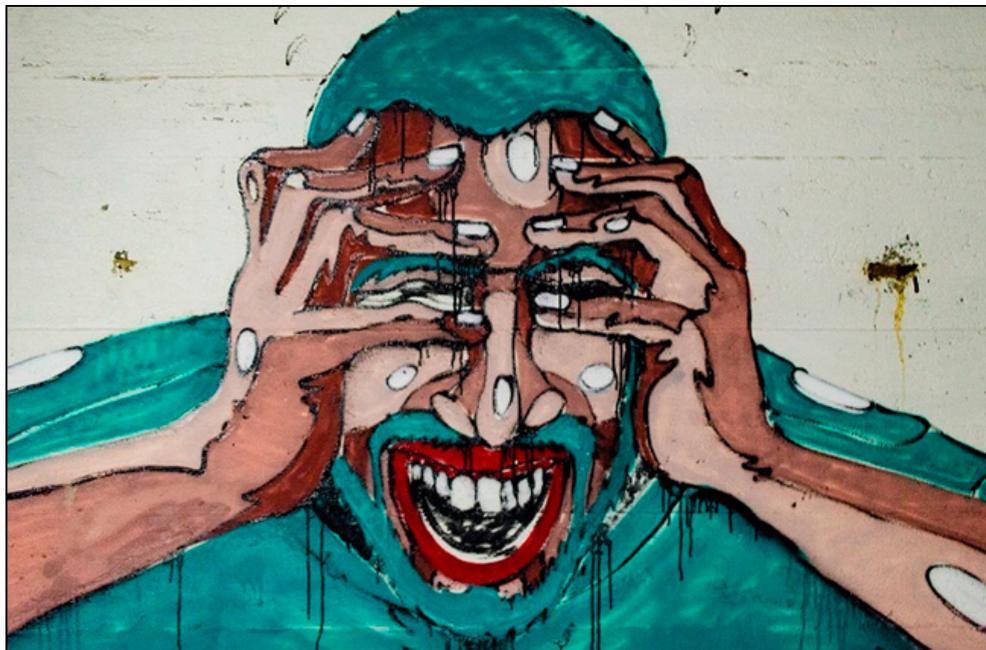
4. Findings

The visual data collection methods resulted in an emotive journey for the researcher and the participants. The researcher and participants were also familiarised with novel ways of relating to the qualitative inquiry in reverential and meaningful ways (Lenette & Boddy, 2013). By employing visual methods, greater reflexivity and nuanced meanings of the students'

concepts of wellbeing were attained. The following four identified themes emerged from the data applying Photovoice methodology to explore wellbeing.

The pressures of academia and mental health challenges

A prominent theme in the findings was the clear link students made between their mental health challenges and their wellbeing. Participant F's image titled "*screaming at the screen*" depicts a young person grabbing his head with his hands and screaming with what appears to be frustration or anger. This image displays a heightened state of emotional dysregulation and a feeling of not being in control. The image could also allude to anxiety, hopelessness and sadness.



Participant F: Image A: "*Screaming at the screen*"

Another image submitted by Participant F titled "*The silent sickness*" depicts a blank face with a grotesque protrusion of another face sprouting from the head. The second head is crying black tears and seems in agony. Around this image are hands clawing in a menacing way towards these two heads. The disturbing image is surrounded by a black oval frame. The image appears to depict sadness, dissociation, a "dark" side or an "ugly" side, feelings of depression and a sense of not being recognised; of being faceless and not seen. The distressed face seems to be plucked from the faceless head by one of these demanding hands, which could suggest a feeling of being torn apart. However, it could also point toward feeling divided by all the demands the student faces. The pandemic, emergency remote teaching, their own developmental phase, loss and grief, and various other factors could be forcing the worst in them to emerge, or a part of them to scream for help signalling a desperate attempt at connection.



Participant F: Image B: "The silent sickness"

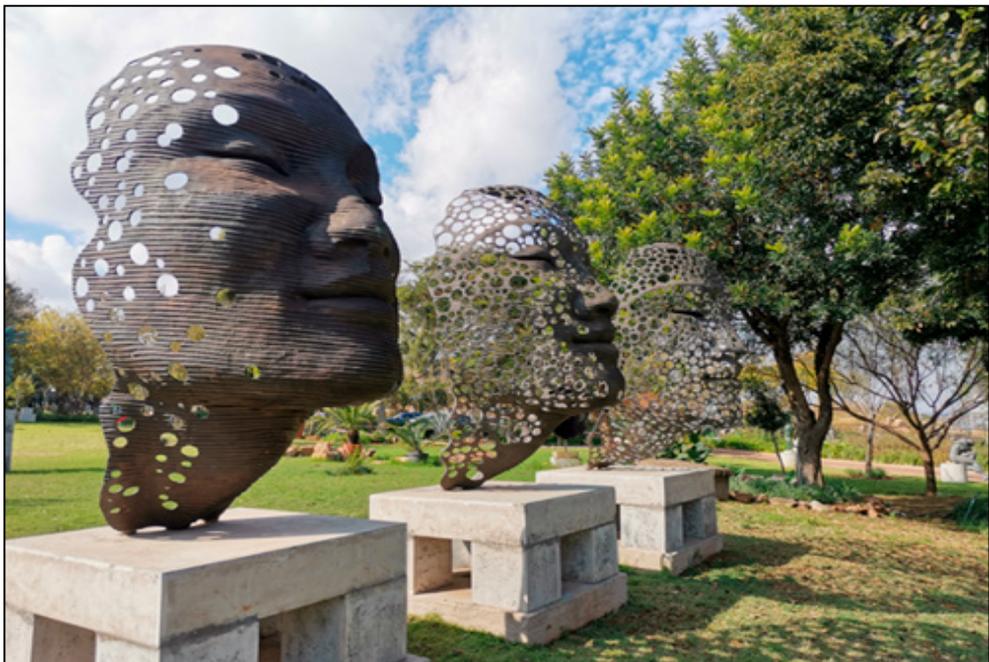
A powerful image is also provided by Participant A's photo titled "*Fading away*". This photo shows three statues of a head, depicting a process of fading away. The statues' facial expression seems neutral and tranquil, yet the head is disappearing. Images from various participants confirmed this sense of not feeling heard or seen. Participants highlighted the "dehumanising" effect of emergency remote learning, and the feeling of disappearing into a sea of black screens. They reported subsequently suffering from feelings of loneliness, depression and anxiety.

Participant E reflects:

"It feels like I am walking down a long, dark tunnel. There is no light at the end. I am drowning. The pandemic is a nightmare I wish I could wake up from"

Participant N reflects:

"See me. Hear me. I am not just a blank screen. I am here"



Participant A: Photo A – "*Fading away*"

Participants' photos and images indicated a clear connection between various feelings associated with mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety and overwhelming feelings of disconnect and loneliness. The images of wellbeing pointed overwhelmingly to psychological safety and connectedness, loneliness, disconnection, and feelings of depression and anxiety.

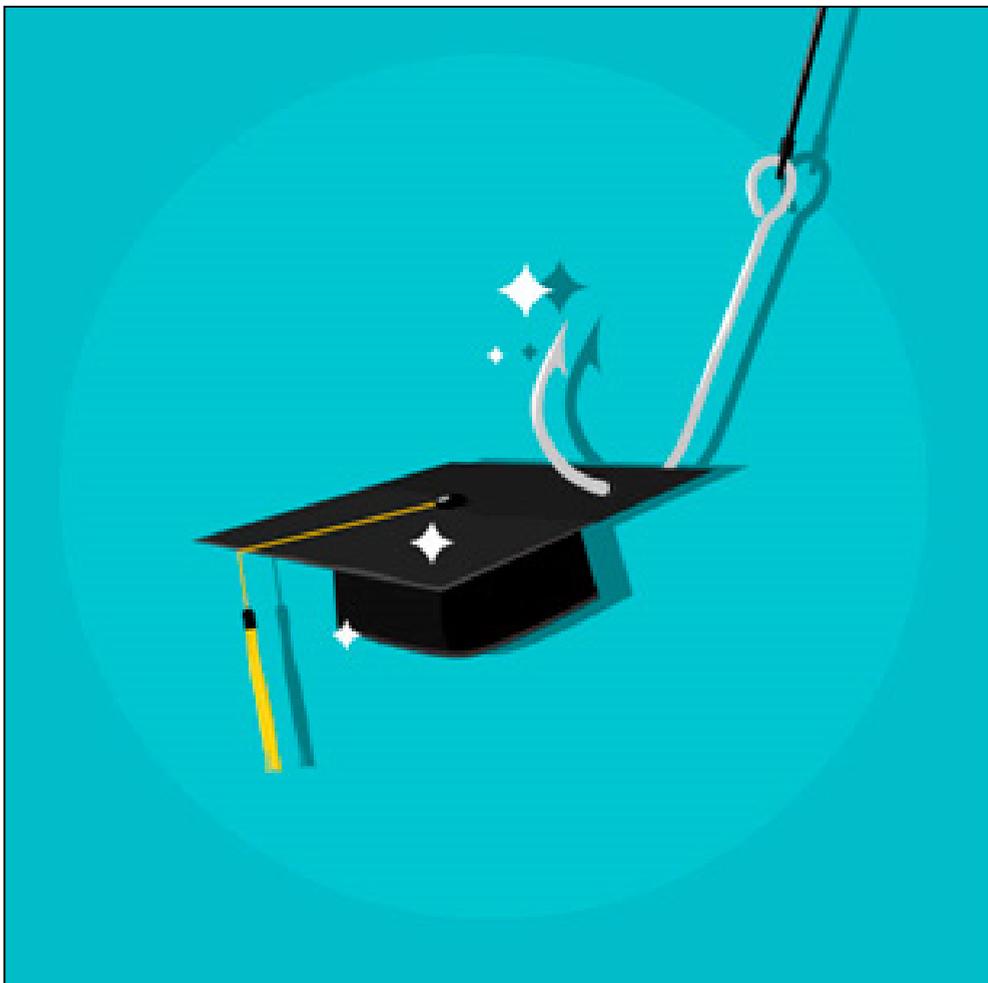
Disillusionment with higher education

Participant J provided an image of her graduation programme with the caption “*Welcome to my virtual graduation*”. This image is titled “*Ode to the disillusioned*”. The image appears to come to terms with the disillusionment and disruption caused by the pandemic; an entire academic career culminating in one brief moment on a screen. The image speaks of disappointment and weariness at the opportunities and moments that were lost and will never be regained.

Participant M reflects:

“I was robbed by Covid. My photo with cap and gown will not hang on my wall, next to my older sister’s graduation photo. It will always feel fake. It’s unfair”

Another image by Participant F titled “*Hook, line and stinker*” depicts a graduation hat adorned with sparkles and a fishhook.



Participant F: Image B – “*Hook, line and stinker*”

As the title of the image suggests, there is a tainted quality to the image. Although the promise of graduation and a tertiary qualification's impact on their future seem to be dangled in front of students, the same promise and pressure is what drives them to engage with academic dishonesty in order to obtain it. Other images by participants seem to agree with this sense of disillusionment with the system, and with the impossible position they seem to find themselves in where they have everything to lose.

Participant K reflects:

"I feel cheated. Why would I care about cheating if I feel so angry and cheated by the pandemic. I had no graduation. I had no nights out with friends and being a student and getting in trouble. Everything was online, work, stress and worry. It was unfair, and I feel cheated in a way"

The images depicting a sense of disillusionment may go even deeper, suggesting that students seem to be unsubscribing from the "prestige" and "integrity" of higher education qualifications, especially since it stands in such stark contrast to the real-life hardships, loss and grief they went through during the pandemic.

Participant O reflects:

"My whole world was turned upside down. I stared at a screen day in and day out. I just feel like there are worse things than what I did to survive my studies that time. My life was complicated"

Connection as central to wellbeing

The overwhelming theme from images and photos submitted by participants to capture their experiences of wellbeing pointed to connection with others and feeling connected to the world around them. Participant M's image titled "*Shooting pool with friends*" depicts three students casually posing for a selfie while engaged in a game of pool. They seem to be in a communal space, possibly a space where students often gather to socialise. This image is powerful in that it encapsulates a return to the "new normal" after the lockdown period that was enforced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a stark reminder of students' need to experience "student life". Another photo submitted by Participant L titled "*Soccer is life*" depicts a varsity soccer game between two rival teams. The stadium is packed with spectators, and the spray lights light up the sports field at night. Spectators' faces portray various expressions, pointing to them being immersed in the game. The picture captures a sense of camaraderie among the spectators; they are all gathered with the common goal of supporting their team. This connection between students and the act of participating in social events may be a powerful determinant of student wellbeing. Similar photos were submitted by Participant C, Participant G and Participant Q, depicting students posing for "selfies"; some are wearing university sports regalia, while others are socialising in campus spaces. The persistent themes across these images are togetherness, friendship and connection in campus spaces. In all these images, individuals are smiling and posing in ways that indicate they feel safe and contained with those with them in the photos.

Participant B reflects:

"I wish for the together times. When we were more than just faces on screens. When we were present in our bodies and alive. When lots of people together felt safe, not scary"



Participant D: Photo A: *"Prickly perseverance"*

Other images that were submitted pointed to the family's role in students' wellbeing, as well as resilience, despite difficult circumstances. One participant captured his image of resilience in the form of a photo of his pet hedgehog. In the image titled *"Prickly perseverance"*, Participant D captures an adult hedgehog being held in someone's hand. The animal's back is covered

in its signature quills, yet the front of the hedgehog reveals a soft belly, alluding to a certain sense of vulnerability.

Participant C reflects:

"I think I realized that I am tougher than I think. Sometimes I feel fragile and weak, which tempts me to take the easy road with my studies, but then there are times when I want to be strong, and where my mind is made up. I know I can do this"

The adversity caused by the pandemic and emergency remote learning seem to have significantly impacted university students' wellbeing. Connection to their peers, family, and campus spaces appears to play a role in their general wellbeing. The cultivation of resilience also seems to contribute to their overall sense of wellbeing during the pandemic.

5. Discussion

The study aimed to explore and understand students' experiences of wellbeing in the education faculty of a higher education institution in South Africa. The findings are contextualised within the broader study that looked at student wellbeing. The findings showed that experience mental health concerns and disillusionment with higher education. Their wellbeing was associated with a sense of connection with themselves, their peers and the campus space, and the cultivation of resilience.

The present study found that students experience feelings of loneliness, disconnection, depression and anxiety. A prominent link exists between academic performance and mental health (Evans, Borriello & Field, 2018; Hughes & Spanner, 2019; Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Depression has been found to be a significant predictor of poor academic performance and results in a higher probability of dropping out in the university student population group. Depression also appears to relate with anxiety, and the association between depression and academic outcomes is particularly significant among university students who also have screened positively for an anxiety disorder (Auerbach et al., 2018; Eisenberg, Golberstein & Hunt, 2009). Recent research points to increased psychological distress and mental health concerns among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic, potentially caused by increased social isolation in response to the pandemic (Hamza et al., 2021).

A further consideration when looking at university students' mental health is their developmental phase. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are periods of life during which one is more vulnerable for the development of mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety, which are quite common during this time (Wiens et al., 2017). Emerging adulthood, considered to occur between 18 and 25 years of age, can be a stressful period of life, characterised by transitions, instability and many changes in, among other things, students' education, living arrangements, and relationships. It is also marked by biological and developmental changes, specifically a continued development of the pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for regulation and cognitive flexibility (Patterson et al., 2021).

The study further identified that students experienced disillusionment with higher education, especially after the pandemic. This feeling of disillusionment seems to be connected to the disruption caused by the pandemic as well as the pressure students experience to complete their academic qualifications. According to Korn and Davidovitch (2016), this reflects a growing conception that the grade you receive is less important, as long as you pass the course and graduate. Thus, universities are increasingly becoming institutions that students consider to

be “degree brokers” rather than “education imparters”. Modern universities are unfortunately plagued by the expectations and ills of neoliberalism and capitalism. University curricula and pedagogical practices are also gradually used to a “market-based view of the world” that conceptualises the “good life” mainly as a pursuit of wealth and materialism within a highly competitive market-based system (Mayaba, Ralarala & Angu, 2018). Jordan (2021) states that there appears to be an ever-increasing disillusionment within universities at the moment. Much of the present literature on universities “bears a dystopian tone” (Watson, 2014), with some researchers (Bengsten & Barnett, 2017) pointing toward the mass university’s failure to accommodate pluralism and engagement with the “messiness” of students and their experiences.

The modern university’s propensity towards a business model seems to threaten the undertaking of humanistic scholarship (Kidd, 2021). Mahon (2021) agrees with this view by stating that higher educational cultures are progressively characterised by structures and imperatives that are damaging to individual character. Moreover, the fast-paced world, including emergency online teaching and the online approach, is favouring “accelerative vices” (lavishness, self-destruction, superficiality and aggressiveness). These inevitably crowd out their companion virtues (patience, sensitivity, discernment, attentiveness and restraint), and “hinder the formation of meaningful interpersonal relationships” (Mahon, 2021).

Further findings of this study indicate that students experienced connection as a key aspect of their wellbeing. This sense of connection extended to themselves, their family, friends, and campus spaces. Recent research by Sapiro and Ward (2020) highlights the importance of connection to others, especially in youth. Connection to others, also referred to as social support or belonging, includes aspects such as the providing or receiving of resources to help people cope with stress. “Belonging is a fundamental human motivation” (Baumeister & Leary, 2017), and our wellbeing relies on the fulfilment of our basic psychological needs which includes relatedness to others (Soldevila-Domenech et al., 2021). Soldevila et al. (2021) confirm that connection is an important predictor of wellbeing; the opposite also seems true, that disconnection from those around us often results in poorer health and wellbeing outcomes. Levula, Wilson and Harré (2016) support this finding by asserting that social isolation is the biggest predictor of mental health outcomes across a person’s lifespan. The findings seem to confirm the theoretical framework of this study that suggests within the PERMA model of wellbeing that *Engagement* and *Relationships* are key factors.

The study’s findings suggest that students experienced disillusionment toward the system they found themselves in, and significant struggles with psychological distress and mental health challenges, which were exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Their wellbeing seems to be grounded in their sense of connection with themselves, their families, their peers, and the campus space. The data reflects an increased awareness at higher education institutions of students’ mental health and wellbeing. Their unique developmental phase, psychological stress, and high rates of mental health challenges require a more urgent and systemic intervention. Furthermore, a troubling of the dominant discourses prevalent in the higher education context is required, which leans heavily on a biomedical worldview that is mechanistic in nature and should be abandoned in favour of, as Farrell (2021) suggests, a more contextualising worldview. By acknowledging student adversities as complex and social rather than intelligible and individual, and fostering a culture of acceptance before efficiency, higher education institutions could mitigate the eroding effects of student disillusionment and the mental health crisis.

6. Limitations of the study

The study's limitations include that data were collected at only one higher education institution. Furthermore, participants' recruitment and the information given to participants regarding the research were all in English, which is the second language of most participants in the study. Although multiple photos were analysed for each participant, and the data collected were rich, the sample size was small, and certain demographic groups were underrepresented.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a unique perspective on how students in a higher education institution experience wellbeing. This phenomenon was uniquely explored through a visual participatory method using photos to capture their distinctive experiences. The data foregrounds the unique difficulties posed by students' mental health challenges and their disillusionment with higher education. Furthermore, their wellbeing seems to be reliant on their sense of connection to themselves, their friends, family, and campus spaces. The findings invite a more contextualising and humanistic approach in a rapidly changing higher education landscape.

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