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## INFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “Experiences of African student migrants in Moscow”: Understanding the uses of digital technologies for social services during the COVID-19 pandemic

Standhope Anamoa-Pokoo<sup>1\*</sup>, Olga Alexandrovna Urzha<sup>1</sup>, Solomon Sika-Bright<sup>2</sup> and Delali Margaret Badasu<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has attracted a plethora of research from medical-related disciplines other than sociological and migration disciplines. While a significant number of research papers have considered the impacts of the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures on students, their observations are not directly applicable to the over 5.3 million international students across the globe. The purpose of this study is to understand how African Student Migrants (ASMs) used technologies for social services during the COVID-19 pandemic in Moscow. This study adopted a qualitative research approach to understand the use of digital technologies for social services among 40 ASMs sampled through purposive and snowballing techniques. The findings established that, the use of digital technologies by ASMs played an instrumental role in social services such as accommodation, learning and purchasing patterns rather than social communication, religious or cultural practices, psychological and physical health, and dieting during the COVID-19 pandemic. For policy-level recommendations, tech-savvy developers, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Educational Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the African Union (AU) should collaborate and create digital technologies that are suitable for social services; devise an information platform to capture basic information about ASMs that will enable them to streamline welfare stimulus packages essential to their survival in times of pandemics. This will also serve as a coping mechanism for society to prepare for new social emergencies and use digital technologies to calibrate international education and inform future policies on public health, school closures and mobility beyond borders.

**Subjects:** Public Services; Welfare; Citizenship - Social Policy; Demography; Health Policy; Educational Research; Behaviour

**Keywords:** African student migrants; digital technologies; social services; COVID-19 pandemic

### 1. Background

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared in early 2020 that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a public health emergency of international concern. Since then, the world has witnessed a

substantial rise in the use of technology in many areas of human life; the indubitable fabric of modern society (Nielsen Global Media, 2020; World Health Organization-WHO, 2020). Scholars have widely documented the significant impacts of technology on health and educational services (Khoza & Biyela, 2019; Varker et al., 2018). Technologies such as the internet, computers, social media communication applications and online databases have a broad reach when it comes to wider coverage supports for public health research (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014; Holman et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2019). However, technology-based exposures are associated with secondary stressors and public health crises (Chao et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2017). For instance, the increasing exposure to digital mass media led to collective trauma during the COVID-19 (Chao et al., 2020). These counter-arguments provide a unique opportunity for high-quality research on the positive and negative impacts of technology on health issues that are useful to humanity in dealing with the associated challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Broadly, epidemiological events have psychological effects on the populace (Hirschberger, 2018). COVID-19, for instance, has caused raging direct and indirect deficiencies in all facets of society (Garfin, 2019; World Health Organization-WHO, 2020). Data shows that the number confirmed cases of the COVID-19 are more than 113,991,764, with 2,529,421 deaths and 89,544,831 recoveries as at the end of the first quarter of 2021 (Worldometer, 2021). One of the related public health measures to curb the spread of the COVID-19 was the “lockdown-stay at home” policy. About two-thirds of the world’s population went on total lockdown in the first quarter of 2020. Similar to other countries, the Russian Federal Government adopted the lockdown approaches to prevent and slow down the transmission of the COVID-19. However, this policy resulted in severe and unprecedented social disruptions in the world order (World Health Organization-WHO, 2020).

One of the key social disruptions included the abrupt shutdown of the world economy (Safdar & Yasmin, 2020). Additionally, the “stay home” intervention policy affected economies with increased unemployment and emotional distress (Dutt, 2020; Zubatsky et al., 2020), environment and climate change (Bhattacharya & Shambhav, 2020; Ghosh, 2020), and religious gatherings (O’Donov, 2020). The consequences extended to international relations and affairs (Semple, 2020). For instance, global immobility in the forms of travel disruptions, restrictions and blockages of most governments and foreign nationals from travelling to their origin countries were some of the consequences of the lockdown policy (Semple, 2020). Ziguras and Tran (2020) summarised these impacts as the biggest disruption to international student flows in human history.

Global educational systems were affected leading to widespread closures of universities. According to an assessment by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) the COVID-19 Monitoring Team, over 180 countries implemented nationwide school closures that affected about 97% (more than 1.5 billion) of the world’s student population (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-UNESCO, 2020). Universities abruptly shut down campuses because they were considered high-risk environments for COVID-19 transmission (American College Health Association-(ACHA), 2020). The closure of schools impacted not only students’ direct and indirect lifestyles, but also had far-reaching economic and societal consequences for their families and societies (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-UNESCO, 2020).

It reinvigorated society’s use of technology beyond socio-economic needs. Society’s dependency on technology meant that people spent more time-consuming mass media, watching television, using social media to communicate with others, using apps to shop for food and other consumer products, and participating in-home workouts or fitness (Nielsen Global Media, 2020). Both domestic and international students migrated from traditional classroom learning to online learning (Garfin, 2019). Also, healthcare managers have adopted the use of online platforms for health research, population monitoring, public communication, case recognition, interaction tracking, emergency response management and health resources, and enhanced intervention assessment

based on mobility from the containment times to recovery phases of outbreaks and pandemics (The Rockefeller Foundation, 2020).

While acknowledging the potential benefits of using technology and its critical role in social change during the COVID-19 pandemic, Garfin (2019) argued that using technology as a panacea for socio-economic needs is not without challenges. The COVID-19 increased students' debts in form of the high cost of digital learning, housing and internet services (Fregni, 2020). Other extrapolated socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 on the disadvantaged students and their families included food insecurity, homelessness, child and healthcare problems and higher economic cost of living (Barrett, 2020; Feuer, 2020).

From a sociological point of view, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a global public health threat and a big challenge to the social fabric of society (Bintube, 2020). So far, existing studies by Jamerson and Mitchell (2020), Karp and McGowan (2020), Fregni (2020), Feuer (2020), and Barrett (2020) have considered the effects of the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures on students but such observations are not directly applicable to the over 5.3 million international student across the globe (Ziguras & Tran, 2020). This perhaps explains the dearth of research on understanding the experiences of ASMs' use of digital technologies for social services such as accommodation; mode of learning; social bond, communication with families and friends; religious and spiritual activities; psychological issues; physical fitness; work/occupation and sources of income/finances; purchasing patterns; consumption and nutrition/dieting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The dearth of such research motivated Nott (2020) to assess the accommodation challenges of international students in Europe due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Quinn (2020) researched on how, in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, US universities scrambled to close their campuses and arranged for alternate temporal accommodation with technological and logistical equipment for categories of international students who needed to do lab research. Other studies (Anyanwu, 2014; Khoza, 2018) conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic on the benefits of technology on education revealed that students' use of digital technology facilitated educational achievements. These studies, however, depict the existence of substantial research gaps on understanding the experiences of ASMs' use of digital technologies for social services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keeping these research gaps in mind emphasizes the need for sociological research in response to the COVID-19 challenge, because neglecting socially constructed pathways of research during the COVID-19 pandemic is a potential recipe for mistaken national and international policies that may be more harmful than good. This study fills these research gaps by offering perspectives on how to use technology to improve ASMs' social services. One important aspect of this study is that it produces policy research outcomes that centre on understanding the use of technology as a coping mechanism for new social emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the availability and equitable distribution of social services for ASMs, as well as calibrating international education and informing future policies on public health, school closures and mobility beyond borders.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Social perspectives are still emerging in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Guillén, 2020; Walby, 2020). This symbolizes the existing deficiencies in the formation of socio-theoretical perspectives that provide an insight into ASMs' use of technologies as the medium to meet social services during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are several different approaches through which scholars frame perspectives about the study of pandemics (Guillén, 2020).

We employed Hernes (1976) models of structural change in social processes to elucidate how the COVID-19 increasingly affected the landscape of the social structure of the world, now known as the "new normal." Structural change in social processes is defined by Hernes (1976) as the

alterations to the socio-economic structure of society characterized by technological, institutional, and behavioral factors. From an eclectic viewpoint, the models of structural change in social processes encompass endogenous sources of change and a set of key macro and micro sociological perspectives on structural change, such as Emile Durkheim's social change, Anthony Giddens' agency-structure, Talcott Parson's structure and process in modern societies, as well as Bauman's individualization.

COVID-19 has altered the primary social structures, relationships, and expectations of ASMs and their academic environments, including access to housing, financial assistance, and interactions with family and friends. This reaffirmed the social thinking of Edward B. Taylor that the new culture of change is reminiscent of structuralism in sociology (Bintube, 2020). As a corollary to the "new normal," ASMs have strategized an adaptive reaction to COVID-19 towards ensuring meaningful social life during the lockdown (Bavel et al., 2020). The key strategy involves the need to prioritize the societal responses to the COVID-19 threats to include rational changes in the daily activities of ASMs through the adoption and use of technologies to enhance social services (Bavel et al., 2020; Strong, 1990).

For instance, almost every ASMs is potentially impacted by COVID-19 pandemic issues. The fear of the COVID-19 infection has caused much anxiety and has created an obsession for ASMs with new behaviours such as the frequent wearing of nose masks, washing hands and the sudden eruption of social distancing. This additionally increased the level of unacceptable behavioural traits such as racial discrimination, stigma, and xenophobia towards international students who originate from countries where the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Due to these numerous instances, COVID-19 has rendered individuals like the ASMs and their educational environments anthropologically strange to the world (Bintube, 2020). ASMs now spend more time in the new culture of harnessing technology to obtain social services (Bavel et al., 2020). For example, ASMs' everyday activities have been relocated online: they learn, work, worship, pray, socialize, and shop for groceries from home through the social processes of technology transfers (Bintube, 2020).

Sociologically, a more entrenched stance on the coronavirus pandemic is still emerging. Judging from an eclectic perspective, institutional-level response to the COVID-19 health threats is worldwide and still evolving. Many of these health threats and other social problems associated with COVID-19, provided assumed prescriptions on the use of technology to harness ASMs' social services. Therefore, the models of structural change in social processes provided the theoretical basis for this study.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants and procedures**

The study employed the hermeneutic phenomenological research paradigm as its philosophical approach, with the goal of better understanding the socially created reality of how ASMs used digital technology for social services (Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Van Manen, 2007). The study design included an exploratory case study that enabled the collection of baseline information about the perspectives on the use of technology as a tool to enhance the social services of ASMs. The research approach was situated within Max van Manen's qualitative methodology known as "phenomenology of practice" (Van Manen, 2007) and sought to identify ASMs' practical acts of social lived experiences accessed through narratives (interviews). Specifically, this study relied on the transcendental phenomenology that aimed to describe, on common ground, the lived experiences of ASMs and developed a combination of a textural description (what ASMs experienced) and a structural description (how ASMs experienced the conditions, situations, or context) during the COVID-19 pandemic (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Moustakas, 1994).

Data presented in the study was collected from May 2020 to August 2020 in Moscow, Russia. Russia is ranked by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics as the world's fifth country with the highest number of international students (Peleschuk, 2019; Russkiy Mir, 2018). Currently, 315,000 foreign students are studying in various universities in Russia (Study in Russia, 2021). Two reasons informed the selection of Moscow as a region of choice for study. First, the Moscow region has a large number of international students studying at various universities from the Commonwealth of Independent States such as Euro-Asia (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan), Eastern Europe (Ukraine, the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Moldova), Asia (China, India, and Vietnam), the Middle East (Iraq, Morocco, and Syria), and Latin America (Ecuador, Colombia, and Brazil). Second, nearly a quarter of all foreign students in Russia study in Moscow. For instance, the RUDN university located in Moscow is recognized as the biggest destination for ASMs in Russia because it was established to serve Russian national students and foreign students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Waruru, 2019a).

The increase in the total number of ASMs studying in Russian universities informed the selection of ASMs as the target population. Today, there are 17,000 ASMs studying in Russian universities; Nigeria, Ghana, Angola, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have the highest number of ASMs studying in Russia (Waruru, 2019b, 2019c). Although the absolute higher numbers of foreign nationals studying in Russia come from Euro-Asia, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America (Study in Russia, 2021), between 2010 and 2018, Russian universities recorded a 130% increase in ASMs enrollment, from 6,700 to 15,000 (Waruru, 2019b). This is attributed to one of the educational diplomacies of the Russian Federation that sought to increase the number of ASMs in Russia by spreading the Russian language in Africa through the establishment of more Russian Science and Culture Centers (Waruru, 2019b).

The study's data collection involved an online open-ended questionnaires administered to ASMs at their various hostels and apartments via email, WhatsApp and "VK" social media platforms (based on appointment). Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to select 40 ASMs for the data collection. The use of purposive sampling ensured the effectiveness of identifying ASMs who were willing to communicate and share personal knowledge about their use of digital technology for social services (Bryman, 2008). For example, the researchers approached potential ASMs via telephone calls and WhatsApp chat with the view of having a general discussion about their experiences with the use of digital technologies for social services during the COVID-19 lockdown. This approach was useful because potential ASMs had a fair view of the subject matter of the study before the data collection began. The study then applied snowball sampling to identify other ASMs who were willing to participate in the study based on referrals (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). The snowballing method was appropriate because of the need for practising social distancing and the difficulties in accessing the ASMs with the target characteristics during the periods of the maiden COVID-19 lockdown.

Regarding ethical considerations, the research instrument for this study was vetted and approved by the Postgraduate Department of the Russian State Social University, Russia, Moscow. The researchers, therefore, required ASMs to alert their fellow students about the study. All the ASMs were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. ASMs were free to withdraw from the study at any point, however, no ASMs withdrew their participation from the study. Throughout these processes, the 40 ASMs answered an online open-ended questionnaire that was categorised into four sections;

(1) Socio-demographic characteristics of the ASMs,

(2) Digital technologies and social services (Accommodation; Mode of Learning; Social Bond, Communication with Families and Friends; Religious and Spiritual Activities; Psychological Issues; Physical Fitness; Work/Occupation and Sources of Income/Finances; Purchasing Patterns; Consumption and Nutrition/Dieting),

(3) University Managements responses to mitigating COVID-19

(4) Welfare/Support from home embassy/government.

#### 4. Data Analysis

All the online data collected was analyzed confidentially. A series of steps were adopted in analyzing the data of the study. The data was read four times in order to edit, correct mistakes and make follow-up calls since the open-ended questionnaires focused broadly on ASMs' use of digital technologies for social services during the COVID-19 lockdown. The first two readings helped the researchers understand the transcripts and highlight the emerging themes. The second reading focused specifically on the digital technology usage and social services of the COVID-19 lockdown. Notes were recorded for further use. The third reading included developing a coding frame and assigning pseudonyms to all ASMs who participated in the study. The coding was carried out based on the principals underpinning transcendental phenomenology (i.e., in terms of the ASMs' personal lived experiences) and (including our interpretations of the narrations). The emerging themes included: digital technology usage and social services on accommodation and housing; modes of learning; social bonds; communication with family and friends; religious and spiritual activities; psychological effects; physical fitness; work/occupation and sources of income and finance; purchasing patterns; consumption (dieting); COVID-19 mitigating steps taken by various university administrations; and welfare/support from the home embassy and/or government. During the final reading, the researchers contacted some of the ASMs one month after the data collection and presented some preliminary findings based on their narrations to seek confirmation and feedback about the interpretation of the data. Due to the provision of wrong contact numbers, busy schedules and communication problems, not all ASMs were contacted. The transcripts of the follow-up calls were directly included in the data analysis. The transcribed data was analyzed with the support of N-vivo 8 computer software.

#### 5. Results

Section One: Socio-demographic Characteristics of ASMs

Table 1 showed that almost sixty-three per cent of the ASMs are males which means that there are more male ASMs studying in Russia. The ASMs were aged between 20–31 years. Only 25 percent of the ASMs were graduate students. In terms of the levels of study, approximately 38 percent of the ASMs were in their second year of study. Regarding the study programme, 20 percent of the ASMs were studying international relations while the other 80 percent studied programmes such as Sociology, Economics, Hotel and Tourism Management, Business informatics, General Medicine, Information Technology Aerospace Management, Pharmacy and Biomedical Engineering. The ASMs' countries of origin were Nigeria (20%), Ghana (12.5%), Zimbabwe (12.5%), Kenya (12.5%), Cameroon (10%), Sierra Leone (10%), Zambia (7.5%), Togo (5%), Cote D'Ivoire (5%) and Uganda (5%). Among these participants, 87.5 per cent of the ASMs identified themselves as Christians, with the remaining 12.5 percent being Muslims. These demographic characteristics thus emphasize the diversified background of ASMs.

Section Two: Digital technologies and social services

Digital Technology and Accommodation

Many ASMs resided in university dormitories that had library facilities equipped with easily accessible computers and Wi-Fi or broadband internet connections. Also, the washrooms, kitchen, study rooms, relaxation rooms, gyms, and recreational facilities were in perfect shape. *The ASMs acknowledged how digital technologies were helpful in meeting all their housing needs. They lived in student dormitories with free access to Wi-Fi and a well-installed digital library. According to the ASMs, the use of free internet connections and social media platforms such as Tik Tok and WhatsApp offered them an enjoyable and comfortable stay in their hostels during the lockdown.* ASMs

**Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of ASMs**

Variables	Frequency N = 40	Percent (%)
Age		
20–23	14	35
24–27	22	55
28–31	4	10
Sex		
Male	25	62.5
Female	15	37.5
Educational level		
undergraduate degree	30	75
Graduate degree	10	25
Year/Level of study		
First year	5	12.5
Second year	15	37.5
Third year	12	30
Final year	8	20
Programme of Study		
Sociology	5	12.5
Economics	5	12.5
Hotel & Tourism Management	4	10
Business informatics	5	12.5
International relation	8	20
General Medicine	4	10
Information Technology	3	7.5
Aerospace Management	2	5
Pharmacy	2	5
Biomedical Engineering	2	5
Country of origin		
Ghana	5	12.5
Nigeria	8	20
Cameroon	4	10
Togo	2	5
Cote d'Ivoire	2	5
Sierra Leone	4	10
Kenya	5	12.5
Zimbabwe	5	12.5
Zambia	3	7.5
Uganda	2	5
Religion		
Christianity	35	87.5
Islam	5	12.5

Source: Study data (2020).

expressed and appreciated the varied advantages of using digital technologies to meet housing and day-to-day living needs. They independently confirmed from their experiences that:

*I sleep on a comfortable mattress and have access to a constant flow of potable water and electricity, as well as free internet. I surf the internet, I Tik Tok, I WhatsApp for free. Because of the stringent measures taken by the management of the university, I feel secure residing in this hostel. For me, the COVID-19 never affected my place of abode negatively (male, 24 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

Some of the ASMs went further to explain how they paid their rent using mobile banking and money transfer applications. Even before the pandemic, paying the rent on a monthly basis was a major worry for some of the ASMs. However, through the daily update and information from the management of the university via YouTube live, they realised that accommodation is free during these periods of lockdown. Admittedly, they continued to receive their monthly rent stipend on a mobile phone from their university. One of them revealed that;

*I have no worries as to how to pay my rent simply because the management of my university does not pressure me to pay rent. They are lenient with us (international students) who owe rent and they have offered us a five-month grace period to pay off all our arrears (female, 20 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

In other narratives, few ASMs expressed alternative experiences about the use of digital technologies in meeting housing needs. According to these ASMs, the location and relocation of the hostels had adverse consequences for them. They expressed their frustrations and disappointments, especially at a time when COVID-19 infections were at their peak, and the university's management was forced to relocate them to a single dormitory to better manage the situation. Based on the expressions of the ASMS, such a decision would have been prudent if the management of the university had provided a simple and centralised means of transportation for them. They emphasised that:

*Seriously speaking, I had to commute and move my belongings via public transport to my new dormitory, and such a move was quite troublesome. I could have easily been infected with COVID-19. Also, changing the environment in the period of COVID-19, to me, wasn't the best decision. I don't know how I could use digital technology to aid me in relocating from one hostel to another (female, 24 years, undergraduate, Christian).*

*Oh, how can social media applications help me in this situation? I feel so inhumane. I was kicked out of my hostel because of the so-called renovation of the dormitory. This is the time I needed a place to call home, but rather I became like a "street person" looking for alternate accommodation at the peak of the COVID-19 (male, 28 years old, graduate, Muslim).*

#### Digital Technologies and Mode of Learning

This context referred to how digital technologies shape and inform the mode of learning. The responses on the use of digital technology and modes of learning during the COVID-19 revealed that almost all the ASMs migrated to virtual and digital modes of learning due to the closure of universities. ASMs were able to study online due to the use of laptop or computers and access to a stable internet connection. They expressed joy in their new mode of learning because they no longer wake up at dawn, do their normal morning daily routine and board a train for about thirty minutes to get to the university campus for lessons. Some of the comments included:

*I see the procedure of moving to the university campus for lectures as being laborious. I can easily now learn at the comfort of my room whenever I'm connected to the internet (female, 30 years old, graduate, Muslim).*

*I just need a phone and mobile data. I can even lie on my bed and do my lessons. It takes less time for online lessons. It is so easy and convenient (male, 25 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

Irrespective of the positive narratives associated with the use of digital technologies in the mode of learning, the ASM expressed that the online mode of learning has brought an unprecedented scale of challenges to them. They indicated that studying in the Russian language is difficult and having online lessons are solely virtual and impersonal, so they preferred face-to-face interaction with their lecturers. ASMs have also expressed concerns about the lack of personal computers and laptops for online lessons. This made them lazy as it sometimes affected their levels of concentration during online lessons. ASMs expressed the following negative feelings about online lessons:

*I can barely concentrate and participate effectively in my studies during online lessons. This is because some of my colleagues do not pay attention when the teacher talks and explains key concepts. You can hear background music. At worst, some of my colleagues will be singing and disturbing me during lessons (male, 28 years old, graduate, Christian).*

*I don't have a laptop, so I do a lesson on my mobile phone. Within the twinkle of an eye, I will find myself lying in bed. Online lessons made me a lazy student. I can't tell if I have a completed assessments for all my research tasks. There is limited time for studying online as compared to a classroom lesson. Due to this, online classes come with lots of lengthy assignments, making studying very tiring and cumbersome (female-, 23 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

#### Digital Technologies and Social Bonds with Families and Friends

Related to this theme, digital technologies provided the medium for social bonds and communication with families and friends during the COVID-19 lockdown. Most of the ASMs lamented the challenges of bonding virtually rather than physically with family and friends. They held the view that the use of social media networks for digital communication and bonding was too artificial and had the desire to personally visit families and friends. For example, the following comment reveals that;

*I no longer socialize with friends in churches, schools, playgrounds, and other places. I do that virtually via Facebook and Zoom applications. I miss my family members to the extent that, no social media application or technology can replace meeting them in person (female, 26 years old, graduate, Christian).*

However, a few other ASMs reported having positive experiences with using digital technologies to connect with family and friends. Video calls and e-messaging improved and strengthened their bonds with family and friends. They said that;

*Digital technology is part of us; it has come to stay. Before lockdown, all forms of communication with family and friends were done using technological means such as video calls and online messaging. For now, I communicate with my family and friends more often than before, because they are concerned more about my daily activities: where I sleep, what I eat, and what I do during the days of the lockdown (male, 31 years old, graduate, Christian).*

#### Digital Technologies and Religious/Spiritual Activities

Under this theme, ASMs disclosed the use of digital technologies for religious activities during the COVID-19 lockdown. Both the Christian and Muslim ASMs preferred to worship physically in churches or mosques rather than resorting to an online religious service. They explained this to be the thrust and the heart of religious, spiritual life and worship. The ASMs further expressed how they missed going to church every weekend to worship with other religious believers, praise God and learn from different people about the word of God. Some of the negative experiences associated with using digital technologies and religious activities include:

*It's hard to worship Almighty God from the screens of our laptops and phones instead of being at church or parish (female, 25 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

*It's difficult to attend Friday Muslim prayers online. For me, not being able to mingle with others for prayer and share ideas isn't a good experience for me; Allah prayed in the mosque and not on Facebook or Zoom applications (male, 29 years old, graduate, Muslim).*

Unlike the negative experiences associated with the use of digital technologies and religious activities, few ASMs provided positive accounts of the use of digital technologies for religious or spiritual activities. They claimed that the use of *digital technologies provided a good platform to practice spiritual activities. One of them had this to say:*

*Using digital technologies has not affected my spiritual activity in any way; I still connect, commune, and pray with my Maker through a live online church service (female, 23 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

### 5.1. Digital Technologies and Psychological Issues

The psychological issues discussed under this theme reveal ASMs' emotional and mental well-being. ASMs' use of digital technologies to improve psychological well-being was affected by issues of fear, anxiety, fatigue, unhappiness and confinement to one place. Most of them expressed how it is less complicated to use digital technologies, but not when it comes to issues of emotional needs. They indicated that it was more compounded for ASMs who received terrifying daily updates regarding the mortality rates of the COVID-19 pandemic. They expressed that:

*The slightest cough and tingle in my throat create high levels of fear in me. This affect my psychological well-being negatively to the extent that I can't think or use my laptop to learn in an upright manner (male, 27 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

*Everyday, I use my phone and laptop for various purposes; this creates some sort of psychological fatigue for me because I'm always confined to a room. As a result, I'm not mentally sound. The least noise and knock at my door gave me an abnormal heartbeat. I'm scared about how the world would unfold if we all continued staying at home for several months (female, 26 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

*I am always moody and not responsive to other things. I am mostly depressed and I don't associate with anyone. I would rather read scary news updates and watch photos and videos of people who have died of COVID-19 on the internet, and this has contributed to my emotional stress (female, 25 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

#### Digital Technologies and Physical Fitness

The revelations under this theme reveal digital technology's role in maintaining ASMs' physical fitness. The expressions, however, indicated that digital technologies had a menial role in ensuring physical fitness. ASMs had a monotonous daily lifestyle; they relaxed at the dormitories all day, ate food, watched movies and surfed the internet, which caused physical weight gains. Among the explanations were:

*I haven't done any physical training for a month now and I am becoming fat (obesity). I have subscribed to online daily aerobics, but I sometimes don't have enough broadband connections to browse the internet and follow up on these live streaming aerobics (female, 26 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

*I sleep during the day and watch movies for long hours until midnight. I'm just tired of sitting at home; physically, it's affecting me because I can't go for a walk outside to burn some calories. Sometimes my muscles contract because of lack of training. I cannot go to a public gym. No available digital technology can help me lose weight and become physically fit unless I go to the gym (male, 23 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

#### Digital Technologies and Work/Occupation and Sources of Income/Finances

In the context of this theme, experiences on the use of digital technology and occupation show that most of the ASMs face labour issues such as job retention, a decline in working hours, the rate of work hours and sources of income. The main identified source of income for ASMs came from their parents. However, due to the weak global economy, their parents became economically redundant. This affected the amount and the number of times they received financial support from their parents. It was further challenging for ASMs to use digital technologies to access physical cash without visiting the banking hall in person. Some of the narratives noted:

*I request for money and I receive less money than I requested and expected from my parents. Aside from that, it is extremely difficult to withdraw money I receive from my country. It took three*

*weeks before I could get the needed assistance to withdraw money from the bank (male, 21 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

*The COVID-19 lockdown has crippled my income base. I no longer go to work; this means I'm not receiving any income. I just rely on my savings now. I thought I could find some jobs online, but it seems like all recruiting organizations are redundant now. Indeed, existing technologies aren't helping me to get a job in this difficult time, which is a very big problem for my financial capabilities (female, 23 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

*I must say COVID-19 has greatly affected my work. I am no longer working for more hours like in previous days. But with the advent of technology, I'm able to do some 2-hour jobs online. This makes me worry a lot because the more we are on lockdown, the more I spend money without having enough income and savings (male, 22 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

### **5.2. Digital Technology and Purchasing Patterns**

This theme focused on the ability of the ASMs to use digital technologies in purchasing online goods and services. Most of the ASMs stated that digital technology allowed them to do online purchases for products and services such as groceries, body lotion, and entertainment packages such as live TV shows, sports, and movies. However, they explained that the online transactions for goods and services were very costly. Apart from this, broadband data and airtime weren't free; they spent a lot of money buying telecommunication airtime before they could make any online transactions.

*I buy mobile airtime every three days because digital technologies have become my lifelines. This enables me to use the internet to buy products online and also get myself entertained online by watching sports and movies. That's why I spend money on acquiring an internet bundle; otherwise, my life would be miserable (female, 26 years old, graduate, Muslim).*

*My university is strict about our movement; therefore, I buy body lotion products online using mobile apps. I will say I spend more now. Products are now much more expensive than previously. I mostly rely on my savings (female, 23 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

*Before COVID-19, I spent 10,000 rubles (\$129) on groceries every month. But now I can spend 25,000 rubles (\$323) on groceries every month and yet I'm not able to meet all my basic needs. If technologies were useful and made for ordinary people like me, how come my expenses are increasing instead of decreasing? (male, 22 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

Contrary to these narrations, few ASMs said that:

*I don't need digital technologies or any forms of applications before I can purchase groceries and other related needs. Fortunately, I have a grocery store nearby my hostel. Buying the needed products isn't more hectic than spending my meagre savings (male, 22 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

### **5.3. Digital technology, consumption and nutrition (Dieting)**

This theme summarised how digital technologies have shaped the consumption patterns of the ASMs. Most of them expressed that there is a link between online purchases of goods and services and consumption patterns, i.e., "what you buy online is what you eat." Due to the high cost involved in online shopping, there was a decline in the number of foods consumed by ASMs regularly. In their narrations, some of the eating patterns of the ASM changed due to the challenges associated with buying food items online. The following salient assertions from the ASMs include:

*Technology has negatively affected my dieting patterns because the food I order online are very expensive. I try not to eat so much. I, therefore, eat less to make sure that the expensive food I buy online last longer (female, 23 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

*I ordered rice online and received wheat. That is what technology sometimes does for us. Due to this, I'm not able to eat the food according to my diet plan. Instead, I eat repeated meals every day. I have also tried to cook some of the "wrong" products I received, and trust me, I enjoyed them. I think I have discovered some new recipes (male, 23 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

Contrary to these responses, some ASMs explain that:

*COVID-19 is real. So, with the daily healthy eating tips from YouTube, I can say that my diet has also changed. I now eat less food than I used to. I eat a lot of fruit and vegetables and also practice a balanced diet (female, 26 years old, graduate, Muslim).*

*Using technology to buy products online has changed nothing in my eating patterns. I will continue to eat the same amount and quality of food. Truly, I eat foods that contain all seven nutrients: carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals, fibre and water (male, 26 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

Section Three: University Managements responses to mitigating COVID-19

This section highlighted the mitigating measures adopted by university management to safeguard ASMs. The key commendable measures, such as the provision of free food and healthcare, enhanced some of the basic needs of the ASMs. Every section of the dormitory was disinfected. This was even extended to the products ASMs bought online. They praised and expressed gratitude to their university management for the proactive response to the needs of ASMs. The expressions captured in this context were:

*The university management sees my health as important, which is why they provided us with more medical doctors who conduct regular medical and temperature checks in this hostel (female, 20 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

*The university management has done marvellously well. I'm still enjoying the free food given by my university. Trust me, we are fed very well, three times a day; in the morning, afternoon, and evening. This action lessens the constraints students encounter in getting food (male, 26 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

*"Yes, I do. I'm allowed to buy groceries online and go for a walk within the confines of my dormitory. They constantly remind us to wash our hands, wear a nose mask, and practice social distancing on a regular basis (male, 27 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

Contrarily to the previous observations, some of the ASMs opined that their university management stiffened the federal measures on the COVID-19. One the federal measures say that people should be allowed to go get essential items such as groceries and medicines, but the university management of the ASMs didn't even permit movement within the corridors of their dormitories. According to them, some of these commendable measures were tough and sometimes became unbearable.

*I dislike the idea that students who have money and want to buy products online are not allowed to do so. Meanwhile, some of the food offered by the university management is not wholesome or of high quality (male, 26 years old, graduate, Christian).*

*I don't like the idea that only smokers can go out within the confines of the dormitory and smoke for 10 minutes, while non-smokers cannot go out of the dormitory. I see this measure as being unfair. Non-smokers like me need to walk for a few minutes and learn new things about what the streets and environment look like during lockdowns (female 23 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

#### **5.4. Section Four: Support from the Embassy/Government**

This section reflected the support from the home country's embassies and governments. The main support included gathering biographic information about ASMs, communicating encouraging words, and providing meager funds for ASMs' needs. Only a handful of the ASMs enjoyed these support services. For example, they said that

*I remember that, for once, my embassy communicated with me via Facebook live. Rather than giving us financial support, they motivated us to stay safe (female, 26 years old, graduate, Muslim).*

*It has been two months of staying indoors. I have received \$50 from my government. Logically, how can this sum of money meet and finance my basic needs? (male, 26 years old, graduate, Christian).*

Yet, many of the ASMs expressed that they had no support from their embassy. They expressed their frustrations about the neglect of their governments and embassies in terms of moral, financial, and healthcare support. Some of their expressions included:

*I got no help from my embassy, no moral support. The embassy only provided forms to provide our basic bio-data. Maybe I will get the outcome of the data I provided when COVID-19 is finally defeated (male, 24 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

*I haven't heard from my embassy; they don't provide any help. No communication or providence. Who says they care about me? I'm not from any influential family in my country; my safety isn't a priority to them. I'm surviving because God has my back, not them (male, 29 years old, graduate, Muslim).*

*Each one for himself, God for us all. I think this is the approach my embassy and the government are adopting. Currently, in my country, the government has implemented massive social interventions such as the provision of allowances, water, food, and electricity to the destitute in society. Why can't they extend such support to us on "foreign land"? If anyone cares about my well-being, then it is my family and not my embassy. They haven't shown any love at all. Do international students' lives matter to them? I don't think so (male, 24 years old, undergraduate, Christian).*

#### **6. Discussion**

This study sought to understand the experiences of ASMs' use of digital technologies for social services during the COVID-19 pandemic in Moscow. The results showed that the socio-demographic characteristics of the ASMs are diverse, with backgrounds varying in terms of age, gender, level of education, years of study, programmes of study and country of origin. For example, all the ASMs migrated to Moscow from 10 separate sub-Saharan African countries. Again, the ages of the ASMs ranged from 20 to 31 years, most of whom are second-year students pursuing first-degree programmes in international relations. Undergraduate and graduate students expressed their experiences of using digital technologies for social services in a variety of ways (e.g., accommodation, mode of learning, online purchases, finances, social bonding, physical health, consumption), and there were no differences in the undergraduates' experiences of the use of digital technologies for social services from those of graduate students regardless of age, gender, level of education, years of study, programmes of study, and country of origin.

In our results, ASMs reported residing in hostel facilities equipped with an accessible, well-installed digital library, computers, and Wi-Fi/broadband internet connections. They acknowledged the importance of these digital technologies in meeting their housing needs. ASMs also demonstrated how the transition to virtual and digital modes of learning via the internet, laptops, or computers saved time and avoided long distance travel to university campuses. Similarly, ASMs had the ability to use digital technologies to purchase online goods and services, which included groceries, body cream, and entertainment packages such as live TV, sports, and movies. These results highlighted how the use of digital technologies enhances the social services of ASMs just as Bintube (2020) reported that, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals' everyday

activities have been relocated online: they learn, work, worship, pray, socialize, and shop for groceries from home through the social processes of technology transfers. It is also evident in the studies of Anyanwu (2014) and Major et al. (2020) that digital technologies are sources of success for the academic needs of students. Also, Sokhulu (2020) reaffirmed that emerging technologies equip learners with many aspects of their personalization and socialisation needs.

However, the other aspects of our results revealed that digital technology poses challenges to social services. For example, the ASMs lamented the challenges of bonding virtually rather than physically with family and friends, as the use of social media networks for digital communication and bonding was too artificial. Regarding the use of digital technologies for religious activities, both the Christian and Muslim ASMs preferred to worship physically in churches or mosques rather than resorting to an online religious service, as this reflects the thrust and heart of religious, spiritual life and worship. Also, ASMs' experiences with the use of digital technologies had associated levels of fear, anxiety, fatigue, unhappiness, and boredom, which affected psychological well-being. Furthermore, ASMs indicated that the absence of physical fitness, excessive relaxation, long hours of watching movies and surfing the internet, coupled with a monotonous daily lifestyle and restrictive movement, caused massive physical weight gains. Additionally, ASMs experienced that the use of digital technologies couldn't diversify sources of income, secure jobs, prevent job retention, and resolve the decline in working hours and the rate of work hours. Other experiences of ASMs revealed that the high cost of online transactions of goods and services resulted in a decline in the amount of food they consume daily. Our results revealed that the superficial nature and cost of using digital technologies makes it difficult to meet all social services. This confirms that technology isn't a panacea for all socio-economic needs (Garfin, 2019).

Further results revealed the several mitigating measures adopted by university management to safeguard ASMs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The key commendable measures instituted by the university management that enhanced the basic needs of the ASMs included the provision of free food and healthcare. In fact, only a few ASMs received meagre welfare assistants from their home government. Many of them were neglected and had no moral, financial, or healthcare support from their embassies. This increased their frustration levels. As stated by Guadagno (2020), ASMs are mostly excluded from essential social services by their home governments during pandemics.

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

The study concludes that digital technologies are highly influential when it comes to accommodation, learning and spending patterns, however, they are less influential for social bonding, religious/cultural practices, psychological and physical health and dieting. The models of structural change in social processes confirm that threats associated with COVID-19 changed the social fabric of the world to "new normal," something that accelerated ASMs' response to the breadth of use of digital technologies for social services. Our study further proves that ASMs' essential social services in times of pandemics are embedded in using affordable and easily upgraded digital technologies. Specifically, digital technologies available to ASMs during the COVID-19 pandemic were developed in the absence of "new normal culture" and social distancing protocols. Using such digital technologies in the presence of the "new normal culture" was challenging, costly and superficial enough to answer all the social service needs of ASMs. Overall, a digital divide and inequality existed among ASMs; not every ASMs owned personal computers or laptops and had access to free broadband connections. Interestingly, home governments or country embassies neglected the social service needs of ASMs during pandemics.

For policy-level recommendations, the study advocates the need to mitigate the challenges of using digital technologies during pandemics. World giant tech-savvy developers should create affordable, accessible and easily updated digital technologies that can suit social services of ASMs during in pandemics. Also, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Educational Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the African Union (AU)

should collaborate and devise an information pool platform to capture the basic information about ASMs that will enable streamlining welfare stimulus packages essential to their survival in times of in pandemics. This will also serve as a coping mechanism for society to prepare for new social emergencies and use digital technologies to calibrate international education and inform future policies on public health, school closures and mobility beyond borders.

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