

Qualitative insights into online-based learning barriers: The case of social studies majors during the community quarantine

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Abstract

Online learning became the primary mode of instruction for many universities during the COVID-19 pandemic, but little is known about how this shift affected students in the social sciences in developing countries. This study explored the barriers faced by Social Studies majors in the Philippines as they navigated online-based learning during the government-mandated community quarantine. A qualitative phenomenological design was used, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 23 undergraduate students in a Higher Education Institution (HEI). The data were coded and analyzed thematically to capture the range of student experiences. The analysis revealed six main themes: digital and technical access issues, environmental distractions, academic workload pressure, physical and mental health problems, instructional and communication gaps, and socioeconomic or personal challenges. Students reported that these interconnected barriers significantly limited their ability to engage and succeed in online classes. The study underscores the need for educational policies and interventions that are sensitive to the unique demands of specific disciplines and student populations. Responsive strategies that address both academic and non-academic needs will be critical in improving the quality and fairness of online education in similar contexts.

Keywords: online learning, digital divide, social sciences, COVID-19, student engagement

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1. Introduction

The global shift to online learning marked one of the most transformative changes in higher education, catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Before 2020, digital learning served mainly as a supplement, but the crisis forced an abrupt transition to fully remote modalities, requiring rapid development of infrastructure and pedagogy (Aristovnik et al., 2023; Valente et al., 2021; Polat & Horzum, 2025; Al Mamun et al., 2024). This transition exposed systemic weaknesses in preparedness, access, and instructional effectiveness, particularly in low-resource settings (Golden et al., 2023; Dawadi et al., 2024; Abou-Khalil et al., 2021; Ravi et al., 2021). While some institutions adapted effectively, others faced long-standing challenges that limited their response (Kaeane & Molokomme, 2025; Bishaw et al., 2022; Colclasure et al., 2021). As remote learning becomes more normalized post-pandemic, understanding its challenges and developments remains crucial for sustainable, inclusive education (Ignacio et al., 2024; Matsieli & Mutula, 2024). In developing countries, where the digital divide is more severe, the shift has amplified existing inequities. This study investigates how Social Studies majors in the Philippines experienced barriers to online learning during the community quarantine, aiming to provide insights for post-pandemic educational policy and practice.

2. Literature Review

Phases and Educational Impact of Community Quarantine in the Philippines. Community Quarantine in the Philippines was a major response to the COVID-19 pandemic, established under Presidential Proclamation No. 929, which declared a nationwide State of Calamity and introduced broad restrictions on movement and daily activities (Zech et al., 2023; Cocal, 2021; Siena, 2022). These restrictions began with the strict Enhanced Community Quarantine and later shifted to less restrictive phases like General, Modified Enhanced, and Modified General Community Quarantines, each responding to changing public health needs (Hasselwander et al., 2021; Chu et al., 2020). The extended enforcement of these strict measures, considered among the toughest in the world, suspended in-person classes and pushed schools to quickly adopt online and remote learning (Cuaton et al., 2021; Galanto Ormilla & Ogano Ongan, 2025; Aguinaldo et al., 2022; Ancheta & Ancheta, 2022). These adjustments highlighted both the scale of the crisis and the resilience of the Philippine education system.

Educational, Socio-Cultural, and Economic Impacts of the Community Quarantine on Higher Education. The COVID-19 community quarantine disrupted higher education and forced a quick move to online instruction. Schools faced problems maintaining quality due to weak digital infrastructure, limited training, and unequal student access (Aristovnik et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2024; Savio & Rachel, 2024). These issues exposed long-standing inequalities, especially for students without reliable internet, good study spaces, or strong support systems (Qaribilla et al., 2024; Pettalongi et al., 2024; Tienken, 2020). As a result, student engagement dropped and worries about academic setbacks and mental health increased (Kim et al., 2022; Milne et al., 2021). These challenges show the need for flexible educational models that support both learning and student well-being. The move to online learning had wide-ranging social and economic impacts. Many students were digitally excluded by limited devices, unstable internet, and unsupportive home environments, which reduced their academic participation (Alikhan & Sritharan, 2024; Ali et al., 2024; Aschenberger et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2024). Families faced extra financial strain to buy new technology, and some students left school because of economic hardship (Sultana et al., 2024; Kaisara et al., 2024; Rawlinson, 2025). Institutions in less developed areas struggled with poor infrastructure and turned to emergency teaching, exposing deeper problems (Pandaya et al., 2022; Chaudhuri, 2022; Danga et al., 2024). These challenges show the need for fair and sustainable online education.

Policy Responses. Governments worldwide adopted emergency education policies to keep learning going, with mixed results. Many focused on moving classes online quickly but did not address gaps in access, training, or student readiness (Aristovnik et al., 2023; van de Werfhorst et al., 2022). This caused uneven learning outcomes and hit disadvantaged students hardest (Pettalongi et al., 2024). Most institutions lacked long-term plans and relied on short-term solutions that did not meet standards (Butler et al., 2024; Lup & Mitrea, 2021). These patterns show that emergency measures often overlooked structural inequalities and educational quality.

Global and Local Barriers to Online Learning. Students around the world, including in the Philippines, faced many barriers to online learning during the pandemic. Philippine students struggled with unstable internet, limited devices, and challenges in self-directed learning (Baticulon et al., 2021). Domestic responsibilities and limited contact with instructors made these problems worse (Fabito et al., 2020). Emotional stress, poor time management, and financial strain also reduced effective participation (Sari & Mediatati, 2023; Kokaliari & Roy, 2025; Shanbhog et al., 2025). These issues reflect global trends, especially in developing countries with weak digital infrastructure. Barriers to online learning differ between developed and developing regions because of gaps in infrastructure and support. In the Philippines, access problems and limited resources are major challenges (Solomo, 2022). Students in wealthier countries, however, are more affected by digital fatigue and concerns about instructional quality than by access issues (Baticulon et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2024). These differences highlight the need for local policy and targeted interventions.

Complexities of Online Learning in the Social Sciences. Social Studies majors face unique online learning challenges because the subject depends on dialogue and civic engagement. Both students and instructors in the social sciences reported low motivation, tech obstacles, and poor interaction quality (Lumanaj & Osmanaga, 2024; Cui et al., 2023; Xia et al., 2022). These issues limited participation and reduced opportunities for collaborative learning (Bach & Thiel, 2024; Moosa, 2022; Cheng et al., 2023). Less feedback, minimal peer exchange, and struggles with digital civic engagement further restricted learning (Gherghel et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). Solving these problems is essential for making online social studies more inclusive. Qualitative studies have documented students' varied experiences with online learning, revealing personal, technological, and environmental barriers (Prasetya, 2024; Masrek & Baharuddin, 2023). Researchers found that students struggled with unstable internet, limited digital skills, and poor home conditions (Yeh & Tsai, 2022; Nifriz & Yenti, 2021). Working students faced challenges with time management, emotional fatigue, and competing responsibilities (Mathisen & Sørensen, 2024; Masrek & Baharuddin, 2023). Multilingual learners also had trouble with comprehension and less digital interaction (Gaspar Raja & Ponnusamy, 2024). Together, these studies show the complexity of student adaptation and resilience.

Gap of the Study and Statement of the Problem. Despite extensive studies on online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, most research has focused on general access issues and broad institutional challenges in developing countries (Aristovnik et al., 2023; Baticulon et al., 2021). Few studies have examined the specific experiences of Social Studies majors, particularly within the context of the Philippine community quarantine, where restrictions were uniquely stringent (Zech et al., 2023; Siena, 2022). Existing literature often groups Social Studies with other disciplines or relies on international data, leaving a gap in understanding the barriers faced by these students during local lockdowns (Lumanaj & Osmanaga, 2024; Cui et al., 2023). This lack of focused research means that the lived challenges of Social Studies majors in adapting to online learning under community quarantine remain insufficiently explored. Thus, this study is aimed to explore the barriers experienced by Social Studies majors in engaging with online-based learning during the community quarantine. Specifically, this sought to answer the question: How do Social Studies majors experience barriers when engaging with online-based learning during the community quarantine?

Addressing this gap is vital for guiding educational policy and practice as institutions move toward more flexible learning models. By focusing on the barriers faced by Social Studies majors during community quarantine, this study will provide targeted insights into how subject-specific needs intersect with emergency online teaching. The findings can inform strategies for more inclusive, resilient, and effective online education,

particularly for disciplines that rely on interaction and civic engagement. This contribution is essential for developing responses that go beyond general solutions and address the unique realities of students in the Philippine context.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study uses six complementary theories to create a multi-level framework for understanding barriers to online learning engagement. These perspectives offer a solid basis for analyzing the complex challenges learners face in digital environments, considering individual, instructional, environmental, and systemic factors.

Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK). The Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework shows that effective online learning depends on integrating technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge. When these areas are not developed equally, barriers to online engagement can occur. The model highlights the need for educators to be well-prepared in all three areas to support strong online learning outcomes (Koehler et al., 2013).

Ecological Systems Theory. Ecological Systems Theory explains that individuals develop through relationships within different layers of their environment, from family and school to society at large. Barriers to online learning can arise when there are disruptions or gaps within or between these systems. This framework emphasizes the need to consider environmental factors in learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Cognitive Load Theory. Cognitive Load Theory states that working memory is limited and can be strained by complex information or poorly designed online materials. Too much cognitive demand, like hard-to-navigate platforms or overwhelming content, can reduce understanding and engagement. This theory shows how good instructional design can help minimize barriers in online learning (Sweller, 1988).

Job Demands-Resources Model. The Job Demands-Resources Model suggests that educational outcomes depend on balancing demands, such as workload or technical issues, with resources like support and access to tools. When demands outweigh resources, barriers to engagement and motivation grow. This framework highlights the need for strong support in online learning environments (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states that learners must have their basic needs met, such as safety, belonging, and physical well-being, before they can fully engage in learning. If these needs are unmet, barriers to participation can arise. The model highlights the importance of supporting students' well-being in online settings (Maslow, 1943).

Community of Inquiry Framework. The Community of Inquiry Framework focuses on the interaction of social, cognitive, and teaching presence in online education. Effective learning happens when these elements work together to encourage critical thinking and engagement. Gaps in any of these areas can create barriers to participation and satisfaction in virtual settings (Garrison et al., 1999).

4. Methodology

Research Design. This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to deeply explore the experiences and perspectives of participants. Phenomenology focuses on capturing authentic, first-person accounts while allowing for careful interpretation during analysis (Carel, 2010). The research followed established steps for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, moving from specific examples to broader themes (Fuchs, 2023). Qualitative methods are effective for examining complex issues and understanding how individuals or groups interpret social or human problems. In this study, interviews identified the barriers that Social Studies majors faced with online-based learning during the community quarantine.

Participants and Setting. This study used purposive sampling to select 23 Bachelor of Secondary Education Social Studies majors from a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the Northern part of the Philippines who

experienced the initial implementation of Online-Based Learning (OBL) during the 2020–2021 academic year. Only those who participated in OBL at this time were included, ensuring the research reflected experiences from the program's formative stage, when support was limited. Excluding other cohorts minimized confounding variables and allowed the study to document the primary barriers faced during the sudden transition to online instruction.

Data Collection. Researchers conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews via video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Facebook video chat to ensure safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants received a formal introduction to the study and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. They could use their preferred language. With permission, interviews were audio- and video-recorded; if not, key points were noted instead (Goodrick & Rogers, 2015). Guide questions supported systematic discussion, with follow-up questions used for clarification (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021). Interviews typically lasted about 45 minutes (Loosveldt & Buellen, 2013).

Data Analysis. Data analysis began with verbatim transcription of all interviews followed by careful review for accuracy (Stuckey, 2014). Researchers applied open coding to identify significant statements and create initial codes (Yaghi, 2018). Axial coding then refined these codes and grouped them into related categories, clarifying relationships within participant narratives (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Emerging themes were recognized, and representative quotations were selected, with identifiers for each participant, ensuring transparency and clarity throughout the analysis.

5. Results

This study explored the distinct barriers faced by Social Studies majors in the Philippines during the shift to online-based learning amid the COVID-19 community quarantine, a context rarely examined in previous research. Existing studies often overlook discipline-specific challenges and focus broadly on digital access or institutional responses. Through qualitative analysis, six main themes emerged: (1) digital access and technical issues, (2) learning environment constraints, (3) academic workload pressure, (4) physical and mental health strain, (5) instructional and communication gaps, and (6) socioeconomic and personal difficulties. These findings illuminate the interconnected nature of barriers that affected student participation, engagement, and well-being. By addressing these unique challenges, the study fills an important gap in literature and provides targeted evidence for improving online education policy and practice. Table 1 presents the core digital access and technical barriers encountered by Social Studies majors during online learning. Students reported frequent internet disruptions, device malfunctions, and insufficient access to personal devices, often sharing laptops among family members. Power interruptions and software incompatibility further compounded these difficulties, leading to missed submissions, limited engagement in synchronous classes, and additional stress in managing coursework and communication with instructors.

Table 1
Digital Access and Technical Barriers

Code	Excerpt
Unstable internet connection	"Sometimes, my submissions fail due to sudden internet outages, despite switching to Converge. Uploading large files or completing Google Forms can be disrupted, so I often upload during low-traffic times. Unstable internet also limits my access to modules and reduces my overall productivity." [M4]
Device malfunctions or insufficiency	"Attending synchronous meetings on my phone can cause malfunctions. I use it to download and transfer files since my laptop struggles with Wi-Fi, creating a hassle I've managed to overcome." [F7]
Shared device constraints	"Sometimes, I complete three or four activities at night since I'm the only one with laptop access. Other times, I am unable to do anything at all." [M2]
Power interruptions	"During synchronous meetings, sudden power outages in our community disrupt online class recitations, making it difficult to keep up with the discussion and respond promptly." [F9]
Software incompatibility	"My main concern is internet connectivity and device availability. Some devices, like the brand of my mobile phone, lack essential software such as Google services, which are needed for Google Classroom." [M3]

Note. Participant identifiers in brackets represent unique respondents. M - Male; F - Female

Table 2 highlights the learning environment constraints faced by Social Studies majors during online learning. Participants described how noisy households, lack of dedicated study spaces, and external environmental noise undermined their concentration. Distractions from social media and the need to manage household responsibilities further compounded these challenges, making it difficult for students to maintain focus and effectively balance academic and personal obligations.

Table 2
Learning Environment Constraints

Code	Excerpt
Noisy household setting	"My main challenge in online learning is the noisy household, especially during Google Meet classes, where background noise from many people disrupts my focus." [F12]
Lack of dedicated study space	"The biggest challenge is the lack of a dedicated study space at home, making it hard to focus amid various non-academic distractions while managing time and multiple activities simultaneously." [M5]
External environmental noise	"Our classes are mostly before lunch, but being near a noisy resort, external sounds often distract me during sessions." [M1]
Distractions from social media	"Social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube often distract me, consuming more time than productive Google searches." [M8]
Competing household responsibilities	"The household environment brings competing responsibilities, especially chores. I struggle to focus on studies while balancing duties as a daughter and managing tasks before studying." [F5]

Note. Participant identifiers in brackets represent unique respondents. M - Male; F - Female

Table 3 demonstrates that Social Studies majors experienced significant academic workload pressure during online learning. Students reported an increased volume of assignments, simultaneous deadlines, and compressed module delivery. These factors, coupled with difficulties in managing time and overwhelming academic demands, led to heightened stress and a constant rush to complete tasks, often at the expense of deeper engagement and learning.

Table 3
Academic Workload Pressure

Code	Excerpt
Increased volume of assignments	"In online learning, the workload feels heavier than in face-to-face classes, likely to compensate for reduced physical attendance. This increase in assignments can be frustrating, as quantity doesn't necessarily reflect actual learning." [F10]
Simultaneous deadlines	"There are teachers who send modules week by week, which is less stressful. However, most send entire modules for midterms, making it stressful to juggle unfinished tasks alongside new ones." [M6]
Compressed module delivery	"There are teachers who send modules week by week, which is less stressful, but most deliver entire modules for midterms, creating pressure to complete many tasks in a short time." [M10]
Difficulty managing time	"Managing time is my biggest challenge now, as it's critical to juggle all activities simultaneously, which I wasn't as pressed to do before." [F3]
Overwhelming academic demands	"It's very overwhelming and stressful, not just because of restrictions but also the constant pressure to finish activities quickly. I end up rushing just to get them off my mind." [F11]

Note. Participant identifiers in brackets represent unique respondents. M - Male; F - Female

Table 4 reveals the physical and mental health strain experienced by Social Studies majors during online learning. Students reported eyestrain, vision issues, and physical discomfort from prolonged device use. Many described persistent mental fatigue and stress, while others highlighted feelings of isolation or sadness, noting that these challenges were intensified by heavy demands, self-doubt, and limited opportunities for meaningful connection.

Table 4
Physical and Mental Health Strain

Code	Excerpt
Eyestrain and vision issues	"I experience eyestrain and vision issues from prolonged exposure to computer screens during online classes, along with back pain from sitting for long periods." [M7]
Physical discomfort from device use	"I experience physical discomfort during online classes, including back pain from prolonged sitting and eye strain caused by extended exposure to computer screens." [M11]
Mental fatigue or stress	"I feel mentally fatigued and stressed, not only from restrictions but also the constant pressure to complete activities quickly. I often rush just to clear them from my mind." [F4]

Feelings of isolation or sadness	"I feel isolated and sad during online learning, experiencing more breakdowns than in face-to-face classes. The heavy demands and self-doubt affect my mental stability, especially when I struggle to understand lessons." [F6]
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Note. Participant identifiers in brackets represent unique respondents. M - Male; F - Female

Table 5 summarizes the instructional and communication gaps encountered by Social Studies majors in online learning. Students highlighted limited teacher feedback, insufficient teacher-student interaction, and vague instructions. Inaccessible or ineffective learning materials, difficulty reaching teachers for support, and delayed grading further impeded learning, often leaving students uncertain about their progress and without timely guidance for improvement.

Table 5

Instructional and Communication Gaps

Code	Excerpt
Limited teacher feedback	"Some teachers don't provide feedback, especially on major requirements, making it difficult to build a teacher-student relationship and maintain effective communication." [F2]
Insufficient teacher-student interaction	"The limited interaction between teachers and students creates challenges, as we often misunderstand instructions and end up completing tasks without fully grasping or following the proper steps." [F8]
Vague or unclear instructions	"The limited interaction with teachers leads to vague or unclear instructions, making it hard to fully understand tasks. As a result, we often just comply without completing the proper steps or putting in full effort." [M9]
Inaccessible or ineffective learning materials	"Some learning materials, especially videos, are difficult to understand. While clear, concise videos help, others feature speakers with strong accents or come from foreign sources, making them less accessible and forcing us to find alternative resources." [F1]
Difficulty reaching teachers for support	"Reaching teachers for support is difficult, as some do not check if students understand the lessons, and contact details are often unavailable, limiting opportunities for consultation and guidance." [M6]
Delayed grading and feedback	"Most teachers do not provide timely or sufficient feedback. Some fail to return scores, leaving us unaware of our mistakes and unsure how to improve." [M3]

Note. Participant identifiers in brackets represent unique respondents. M - Male; F - Female

Table 6 highlights the socioeconomic and personal challenges Social Studies majors faced during online learning. Students reported financial difficulties in maintaining internet access, the need to balance work with studies, and family problems that affected their focus. Added non-academic responsibilities, such as extracurricular activities, further complicated their ability to manage academic commitments, intensifying the pressures they experienced throughout the community quarantine.

Table 6

Socioeconomic and Personal Challenges

Code	Excerpt
Financial difficulties	"My main challenge in online learning is financial difficulty, as maintaining internet connection requires buying data load, which can be costly." [F5]
Need to work during studies	"During the pandemic, I faced challenges balancing family issues and working as a barangay frontliner and online tutor, which often hindered my ability to focus on learning." [M6]
Family problems affecting learning	"Family problems during the pandemic significantly affected my learning which added to the challenges I faced." [M9]
Added non-academic responsibilities	"Balancing non-academic responsibilities, like attending dance troupe trainings and shoots, requires significant time, especially since most members are from outside Baguio, adding to my commitments." [M7]

Note. Participant identifiers in brackets represent unique respondents. M - Male; F - Female

6. Discussion

Digital Access and Technical Barriers. Digital access and technical problems disrupted online learning for Social Studies majors during the community quarantine. The TPACK framework shows that teachers need to blend technology, content, and teaching methods for effective instruction (Koehler et al., 2013). Still, participants faced many obstacles. [M4] struggled with unstable internet, limiting access to learning platforms, while [F7] used a malfunctioning phone because the laptop's Wi-Fi did not work. Others reported limited access to personal

devices [M2], frequent power outages [F9], and software that did not work on their phones [M3]. These issues made it hard for students to attend classes, finish assignments, and participate fully. They also made it difficult for teachers to provide steady academic support. Previous studies confirm that digital access problems lower engagement and reduce the effectiveness of instructional support in virtual classrooms (Knussen & Agnew, 2022; Çetin & Şahinkarakaş, 2017; Tate & Warschauer, 2022). Improving digital infrastructure is key to equitable access and meaningful support in online education.

Learning Environment Constraints. Environmental distractions during community quarantine made it hard for Social Studies majors to stay engaged in online learning. Ecological Systems Theory highlights how immediate environments shape behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and this study points to the home as a key factor in academic participation. Students described various disruptions: [F12] struggled with household noise during live sessions, [M5] had no private study space, and [M1] was distracted by noise from nearby public areas. [M8] found social media a constant distraction, while [F5] had trouble balancing schoolwork with household chores. These pressures scattered students' focus and limited sustained learning. Previous studies confirm that environment strongly affects student participation in online education (Ali et al., 2024; Heilporn & Lakhali, 2021; Rye & Støkken, 2012). Instruction tailored to students' contexts and responsive support can help overcome these barriers (Dreyer et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2011; Dechavez, 2024). These results highlight the need to design learning environments that match students' real-life situations.

Academic Workload Pressure. Heavy academic workloads during the community quarantine made it hard for Social Studies majors to benefit from mentorship. Cognitive Load Theory explains that limited working memory is easily overwhelmed, making meaningful learning and reflection difficult (Sweller, 1988). Students described several challenges: [F10] said online workloads felt heavier than in-person classes, while [M6] and [M10] were stressed by compressed modules and overlapping deadlines. [F3] struggled to juggle multiple tasks, and [F11] felt mentally exhausted from constantly rushing assignments. These demands forced students to focus on finishing tasks instead of engaging deeply with course content, reducing opportunities for consistent mentorship. Previous studies show that academic overload harms learning and lowers the quality of support students receive (Koudsia & Kirchner, 2024; Hilliger et al., 2023). Schools should rethink workload structures and provide flexible mentorship to better support students.

Physical and Mental Health Strain. Social Studies majors faced significant physical and mental health strain during online learning. The Job Demands-Resources Model explains that high demands like long screen time and academic pressure drained students' energy and engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Students described various issues: [M7] and [M1] had eyestrain and back pain from too much screen use, while [F4] felt mentally fatigued and stressed by deadlines. [F6] reported sadness and isolation, especially when struggling with lessons. Limited peer interaction and few structured breaks made these problems worse. Other studies confirm these findings. Kumar and Kaur (2022) found most students suffered eyestrain and exhaustion. Syahputri et al. (2020) reported widespread fatigue and isolation, and Sy et al. (2022) linked heavy academic loads to mental fatigue. These results show that health-related strain is a structural barrier to learning. Schools should adopt wellness practices, such as screen-time limits and better mental health support.

Instructional and Communication Gaps. Instructional and communication gaps made it difficult for Social Studies majors to engage in online learning during the community quarantine. The Community of Inquiry framework highlights that clear instructions, timely feedback, and steady communication are essential for effective learning (Garrison et al., 1999). Students reported several problems: [F2] missed teacher feedback, [F8] felt confused by limited interaction, and [M9] struggled with vague instructions. [F1] couldn't access important materials, and [M3] faced grading delays that left their progress uncertain. These issues lowered student confidence and reduced opportunities for guidance. Research shows that clarity prevents confusion (Eriksson, 2021), and effective feedback strengthens emotional support and motivation (Pereira et al., 2021; Barboza & Silva, 2016). These findings show that instructional breakdowns are barriers to equitable learning. Strengthening teaching presence through better communication, accessible materials, and prompt feedback is vital for

improving student engagement.

Socioeconomic and Personal Challenges. Socioeconomic and personal challenges disrupted academic engagement for Social Studies majors during the community quarantine. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs says that basic needs like safety and security must be met before students can learn effectively (Maslow, 1943). When these needs went unmet, students' participation weakened. [F5] struggled to afford mobile data, and [M6] had trouble balancing paid work with online classes. Family stress [M9] and demanding extracurricular duties [M7] also made it harder for students to focus. These pressures reduced emotional stability and pushed students to prioritize survival and family responsibilities over coursework. Research confirms that financial and family burdens lower engagement in online learning (Abo Hamza et al., 2024; Abo Hamza & Elsantil, 2023). Digital access alone is not enough if students' basic needs are unmet. Schools must help by offering financial support, flexible scheduling, and access to psychosocial services to promote fair learning opportunities.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary of Key Findings. This study examines the barriers Social Studies majors in the Philippines faced during the shift to online learning under community quarantine. By capturing students' experiences, the research shows how limited digital access, unsupportive home environments, heavy academic workloads, health concerns, instructional gaps, and socioeconomic challenges combined to limit participation and well-being in online learning, especially in a developing country.

Limitations. This study has several limitations that define its scope. It focused on one group of Social Studies majors from a single university in Northern Philippines, with data collected only during the early phase of community quarantine. As a result, the views of students from other fields, regions, or later periods may not be reflected. Reliance on self-reported data brings potential bias, and using only online interviews may have excluded those facing the greatest digital challenges. The lack of follow-up interviews and member checking limits the study's ability to track changes in student experiences or verify findings. While the team used rigorous qualitative methods, the absence of an independent audit and the influence of researcher perspectives are also important to consider. Still, the study provides valuable insights into student experiences during a major disruption in higher education.

Generalizability and Transferability. Although these findings are based on the specific context of the Philippine community quarantine, the study highlights patterns like digital inequity, increased academic demands, and environmental distractions that also appear in research from other low- and middle-income countries. Still, unique aspects of the Philippine response, such as strict and prolonged lockdowns and local institutional adjustments, may limit how directly these results apply elsewhere. Readers should consider local infrastructure, policies, and cultural norms when using these findings. Comparative research across different settings is needed to clarify where these results apply.

Recommendations. Documenting Social Studies majors' experiences during this major educational disruption shows the need for student-centered online learning policies tailored to both disciplinary and local needs. Higher education leaders should go beyond generic solutions and create support systems that offer flexible workloads, fair access to technology, strong mental health resources, and better teacher-student engagement. Policy changes should focus on adaptability and resilience, especially as blended and remote learning become a regular part of education after the pandemic.

Practical Implementations. Based on students' experiences in this study, several practical strategies are recommended for educators and policymakers. Teachers should use ongoing formative assessments, like digital check-ins and timely feedback, to spot and address early signs of disengagement. Course designs need flexible assessments and alternative submission options to help students with technology or environmental barriers. Institutions should improve digital infrastructure, set up rapid technical support, and prioritize device lending or data subsidies for vulnerable students. Targeted professional development can give faculty tools to manage

cognitive load and design inclusive online environments. Adding psychosocial support, such as structured peer groups and accessible counseling, to learning platforms can also boost student resilience and well-being. These recommendations, rooted in students' voices, provide a practical guide for improving online education in the Philippines and similar settings worldwide.

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