

The Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic towards Socioeconomic and Well-Being of Employees and Students in Golden Triangle Kuala Lumpur



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ABSTRACT: This research is intended to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on social, economic, and overall wellness of the community, particularly in the Golden Triangle of Kuala Lumpur. The shift in working and academic landscape significantly accelerated by the pandemic with the adoption of work-from-home, online learning, and remote working to prevent the spread of virus, with the implementation of strict lockdowns, social distancing, and closure of businesses operation. However, the prolonged effects of the pandemic in Malaysia which lasted for more than two years, has led to negative connotations in their socioeconomic and overall well-being, due to various factors towards the working community and higher education students in Malaysia. As the nation rushes towards recovery, it is crucial to address the issue of the working community in minimizing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their socioeconomic status and overall well-being. This research intended to shed some light in addressing multifaceted approaches to be implemented in creating a sustainable path forward and building a more resilient and thriving community.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19 Pandemic, Socioeconomic, Well-being, Kuala Lumpur.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization declared the Coronavirus outbreak a pandemic on March 11, of the year 2020, and by the first week of April, there was a nearly 80% decline in occupancy for multiple premises in corporate, institution and commercial, as a collective effort in combating the virus. Infectious disease outbreaks can easily cross borders to threaten economic and regional stability, as has been demonstrated by HIV, H1N1, H5N1 and SARS epidemics and pandemics (Verikios, Sullivan, Stojanovski, Giesecke, & Woo, 2015). Within months of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has resulted in a significant loss of lives worldwide, with millions of people succumbing to this virus. Healthcare systems around the world have been overwhelmed, facing challenges in providing adequate medical care and resources to handle the surge in cases. As the emergency response, all political, economic and social activities came to a halt, as everyone was advised to stay at home and practice social distancing. For months, this pandemic of the coronavirus has left the community with countless questions and many uncertainties. Beyond the debilitating, sometimes fatal consequences, for those directly affected, pandemics have a range of negative social, economic, and political consequences (Davies, 2013).

Recent research finds that in the services sector, many industries face enormous challenges and that the negative effects of the out-break might last for years (Cameron and Morath 2021; Gia Hoang et al. 2021). Moreover, the pandemic has led to dramatic changes in how businesses act, and consumers behave (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). COVID-19 pandemic affected the working population in all aspects of life, from economy, social and political; for the world to survive, we had to resume the operation and businesses to sustain. During the pandemic, businesses had to navigate unprecedented challenges and adapt quickly to the rapidly changing circumstances. The ways in which businesses operated during this time varied depending on factors such as their industry, size, location, and government regulations. Most of the companies have shifted their operation by adapting digitalization and technology and introduced work-from-home (WFH) order or remote working approach for the workers to abide by, allowing employees to work whenever possible, while essential businesses and operations resumed as usual.

The COVID-19 pandemic also has had a significant impact on academic institutions and the education system as a whole; during the height of the pandemic, schools, academic institutions, and universities around the world were forced to close their physical campuses to prevent the spread of the virus. This led to a rapid shift to remote learning, with students and educators transitioning to online platforms for classes. The sudden shift to remote learning caused disruptions in the academic calendar,

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curriculum delivery, and assessment methods. Some students faced challenges adapting to online learning, particularly those without access to necessary technology or a conducive learning environment. This phenomenon not only disrupted the students and educators, but parents were directly involved as providing a comprehensive studying environment became crucial and monitoring the children falls into their full-time responsibility.

These problems occurred due to COVID-19 pandemic and have had profound effects on the adult community, whether they are working or studying. Even though we have eased the pandemic norms and entered the endemic phase, these temporary responses started to show the negative impacts towards the community. Mental health became a pressing concern as the pandemic induced anxiety and stress, with many communities witnessing an increase in mental health-related issues due to no work-life balance, burdening of personal responsibilities and the lack of healthy interactions socially. As the remote working and learning required access to technology and conducive settings, the pandemic exacerbated existing social inequalities, with marginalized communities facing disproportionate impacts. Lack of access to technology, healthcare, and essential resources further isolated vulnerable populations which put a strain on the well-being of the community. While technology allowed remote work for some, it further widened the income gap, as many lower-income individuals couldn't access such opportunities. Small businesses, in particular, faced financial hardships during the pandemic due to reduced customer demand and temporary closures. Many sought government assistance or adapted pricing strategies to stay afloat, which proved to be competitive and inadequate.

This journal identifies the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on socioeconomic and well-being of the community, which comprises working community and higher-education students in navigating their way during the pandemic. The study focuses on respondents in Kuala Lumpur Golden Triangle, in setting equal opportunities and a set of challenges imposed on them during pandemic. As we are gearing towards full recovery, it is important to address this issue to provide a comprehensive approach that addresses the immediate and long-term needs of the community. By focusing on economic stability, health and well-being, social equity, technological advancement, community support, sustainability, and education, we can minimize the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and build a more resilient and thriving working community in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many places have been adopting different means to deal and protect themselves against the COVID-19 pandemic, and Malaysia is no exception. Apart from government policy in controlling the outbreak was the lockdown, also known as Movement Control Order (MCO) and travel ban. With the enforcement of new policies, modus operandi for companies, organizations and academic institutions to stay afloat while navigating the way towards recovery has been introduced. WFH or remote working, which are the key solutions, has beneficial effects for both employers, employees and students. The advantages, include and are not limited to reduced commuting time, avoiding office politics, using less office space, increased motivation, improved gender diversity (e.g. women and careers), healthier workforces with less absenteeism and turnover, higher talent retention, job satisfaction, and better productivity (Mello, 2007; Robertson, Maynard, and McDevitt, 2003). Conversely, the drawbacks of the shift in working arrangements due to pandemic include the blurred line between work and family, distractions, social isolation, employees bearing the costs related to WFH. According to Purwanto et al. (2020), there are certain drawbacks of WFH, such as employees working at home have to pay for electricity and the internet costs themselves. Collins and Moschler (2009) found that workers were isolated from their coworkers, and managers concerned about reductions in productivity while working from home. Moreover, the relationship between coworkers could also be harmed (Gajendran R.A and Harrison D.A., 2007). Employees might be distracted by the presence of young children or family members while working at home (Baruch, 2020; Kazekami, 2020) along with blurred boundaries between work and family life leading to overwork (Grant et al., 2019). In a similar vein, the management of boundaries between work and family of remote workers studied by Eddleston and Mulki (2017) revealed that WFH relates to the inability of remote workers to disengage from work.

The surge to digitalization during COVID-19 pandemic also may have impacted the community, both positively and negatively. The drawback from this shift includes the "digital divide" in relation to certain demographic groups that are technologically disfavored through lack of devices, access, skills, content relevance and unaffordable internet data plan (Armbrecht, 2016; De'et al., 2020; Hilbert, 2014). Low education level, low income, disabled, elderly and certain (minority) ethnic groups are vulnerable societies who still prevail and irregularly affect their digital futures (Barenes, 2020; Livari, Sharma & Venta Olkkonen, 2020). This matter significantly affected most of the community in working remotely or from home, as the pandemic pushed them to adapt with the shift while expected to be performing their task or job to their best abilities, regardless of the challenges or barriers they faced during this trying time. This scenario has put a toll on their physical and mental well-being as the pandemic lasted for more than two years before the endemic phase was introduced in April 2023 by the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

For the higher education students, they were facing difficulties as the device or technological gadgets became prerequisite in harnessing the digital world. No possession of computers and internet networks could be a failure in addressing modern digital technology (van Dijk, 2005). With the extension of Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia, it raises some concerns for Malaysian teachers and parents in dealing with learning from home, online classes and virtual social correspondences (Gong, 2020).

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These online activities might be easier for those who have access to the digital network (van Deursen, Helsper, Eynon & van Dijk, 2017). The digital transformation exacerbates populations who remain unconnected with haunting disparities in terms of digital access such as age, education, background, geography and income proportion (Bunyan & Collins, 2013; Cheah & Chun, 2017; Peng, Wang & Kasuganti, 2011).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this research, the study aims to select 383 samples, based on the population of working and studying adults in the Golden Triangle of Kuala Lumpur. This sample takes into consideration 82,500 population of adults based in this area, with 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. However, the selection of the respondents is still taking into consideration the group of people that are defined as a targeted community in this research. They must be 18 years old and above with proficiency in answering the designed questions, which come from these group of people:

- a) Youth – limited access to job opportunity, training and education
- b) Small businesses and entrepreneurs (workers and owners)– challenged by the policies uncertainties and inconsistent demand of their products and services
- c) Corporate & government workers – faced ever changing method of working from Work from Home (WFH), rotation basis and remote working
- d) Educational Institutional Workers – adapted the ever-changing methods of delivery of education while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic
- e) Higher Education Students – challenged by the remote study methods and approaches established during pandemic

The study has been conducted digitally and manually in a random manner, collecting a total number of 336 respondents on the set of questionnaires designed for the research. The study duration is one month and conducted in the month of November of the year 2023. It is important to note that during the survey being conducted, Malaysia has announced the end of pandemic and entering endemic phase since April 2022 as announced by the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Respondent Details

Based on designated criteria and selection stated above, 336 total respondents have participated in the surveys, which comprises various backgrounds, income brackets and working arrangements. Based on the questionnaires provided to the respondents of this survey, the background of the respondents is detailed to give a clear picture on the impacts and the working conditions they were facing during COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the respondents are at the age of 30 to 39 years old, which ideally are in the position of having a stable job or business with 58.9% of overall respondents. The second largest group comes from 28.6% of the respondents which are 18-23 years old, which means they are most probably representing higher education students, private sector workers or still seeking opportunities for employment. In order to evaluate the impacts of pandemic towards their working arrangements, their occupational backgrounds are detailed out, with 42.9% coming from the private sector, 26.8% representing higher education students and 16.1% out of 168 respondents are business owners or working on their own.

Table: Baseline characteristics for respondents of the survey

	All the respondents	
	No.	%
Age		
18-23 years old	96	28.6 3.6
24-29 years old	12	
30-39 years old	198	58.9
40-49 years old	30	5
50-60 years old	0	0
Marital Status		
Single		
Married	204	39.3 60.7
Others: Separated, Divorced etc	132	
	0	0

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Monthly Income	No	
Income		
< RM2,500	90	26.8
RM2,500 – RM4,000	12	3.6
RM4,000 – RM7,100	30	8.9
RM7,101 – RM10,970	66	19.6
> RM10,971	66	19.6
	72	36
Number of Dependent (s)		
None	198	58.9
1-2	90	26.8
3-4	30	8.9
> 4	18	5.4
Respondents' Occupational Background		
Business Owner/Freelancer	54	
Government Sector	30	16.1
Private Sector	144	42.9
Essential Sectors	6	1.7
Educational Institutional Workers	24	7.1
Higher Education Students	90	26.8
Respondents' Current Employment Status		
Fulltime	222	
Part time	12	66.1
Contract	12	3.6
Seeking Opportunities	12	3.6
Not Working	84	25
Respondents' Working Arrangement before Pandemic		
Office Hour	144	42.9
Flexible working hour	90	26.8
Shift	6	1.8
Scheduled e.g.: classes, training, meeting etc	96	28.6

The impacts of COVID-19 on the community will be determined in both aspects, socioeconomic and well-being. From an economic standpoint, there are several baseline characteristics that were asked such as their monthly income, marital status and the number of dependents. Based on the 2022 Household Income and Basic Amenities survey, which conducted every five years by Department of Statistics' (DOSM), the survey segregate the income based on established income classification in Malaysia which consists of three different income groups; Top 20% (T20), Middle 40% (M40) and Bottom 40% (B40). Is it important to know what these classifications are as they will influence many aspects of personal finances, eligibility for financial aid, cost of living and additional taxations. From the survey, 30.5% of the respondents come from the B40 group, 39.2% of the respondents represent M40 and the other 36% belong to the T20 group. The balanced numbers of income groups between each classification managed to create variation in the outcome of the study and view the issue as whole from the point of view of the community. Other factors that are taken into consideration are the respondents' marital status with 60.7% of the respondents are married with a spouse while 39.3% are still single. In relation to personal finances and family expenses, the number of dependents for the respondents were also asked. 58.9% of the respondents have no dependents as most of this portion are still single, while 26.8% have 1 to two dependents.

RESULT

The COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on societies worldwide, reshaping economies, altering social structures, and transforming daily lives. To understand the profound impacts of this global health crisis on local communities, a comprehensive survey was conducted, encompassing 336 respondents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. In this report, we present the

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results of the survey, highlighting key findings and trends that illustrate the pandemic's multifaceted effects on the community. From employment disruptions and financial instability to shifts in social dynamics and mental health concerns, the survey reveals the extensive reach of COVID-19's impact. By analyzing these results, we aim to identify critical areas of need and potential strategies for recovery and resilience building within the community.

Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Economic Aspects of The Community			
Components of Questionnaire	Percentage (%)		
	Yes	No	Not applicable
Disrupting their personal income or revenue	32.1	48.2	21.4
Forcing the company or institution to suspend the operation or retrench the worker	19.6	55.4	26.8
Closing down temporarily or permanently any part of operations/products/business	19.6	55.4	26.8
Affecting productivity or performance in work or study	67.9	32.1	-
Obstructing from performing at their best capabilities in the new work or study settings	57.1	42.9	-
Limiting the access to training or programme to improve the skills and knowledge	44.6	55.4	-
Restricting the opportunity to be mentored or guided during working or studying	42.9	57.1	-
Pushed to resort in finding side income or second job	28.6	71.4	-

In identifying impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the economic aspects on the working community, it is important to note that the shift of working and studying arrangements were able to keep the businesses afloat and sustained, with 48.2% of the respondents faced no disruption in their income, while 21.4% which represented by students has no initial income. Unfortunately, most of 32.1% of the respondents which claimed on their income or revenue being disrupted during pandemic came from SME business owners or workers, where 19.6% stated that they had to close temporarily or permanently any part of the operations, products, or businesses while 28.6% of all respondents had to resort in finding side or second income. The critical element in economic aspects shown 67.9% of the respondents claimed that the WFH or remote working order affected their productivity or performance due to various factors from family obligations, personal responsibilities, and other distractions. This matter also echoed the challenge in performing at their best capabilities where 57.1% believed digital has an impact on their work or study settings. In professional settings, the shift to remote working caused 44.6% of the respondents to struggle in improving their knowledge and skills, while 42.9% longed for the opportunity to be mentored and guided.

Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic Towards the Social Aspects of The Community			
Components of Questionnaire	Percentage (%)		
	Yes	No	Sometimes
Facing difficulties in adapting to the new norms	19.6	55.4	26.8
Causing problems with lack of interactions between peers and team co-workers	30.4	32.1	37.5
Experiencing difficulties in communicating effectively through online	30.4	25	44.6
Creating potential of miscommunication caused by remote online interactions	44.6	12.5	42.9
Experiencing difficulties in disengaging from work after designated working or studying hours	57.1	19.6	23.2
Feeling tired or burnout	66.1	33.9	-

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Decreasing the sense of belongings and team bonding	75	25	-
Causing strained or tension in personal relationship(s)	62.5	37.5	-
Leading sense of loss with the ban of social gatherings	78.6	21.4	-
Resulting in fear or anxiousness with the uncertainties of pandemic	80.4	19.6	-

The most significant impacts of COVID-19 on the targeted demographic for this research are shown in social aspects. With the sets of regulations imposed in the nation and new norms introduced to the community, it is understandable that the community was having a rough time with the transition to remote working or abiding by the WFH order. In relation to the struggle in finding work-life balance, 57.1% of the respondents agreed that the pandemic blurred the line in working or studying within designated hours. With the adaptation of digital platforms and online communication channels, while it has accelerated the process of working and studying, the respondents faced the negative consequences where 87.5% believed that online communications could spark potential communication and 75% faced difficulties in communicating effectively. Many respondents also experienced the lack of human direct interactions to take a toll on themselves, where 67.9% of the respondents felt isolated with the lack of interactions while 75% agreed that remote working decreases the sense of team bonding. With the lockdown through Movement Control Order (MCO) and travel ban, 66.1% feeling tired or burnout due to work, 62.5% experienced tension in personal relationship as a result of confined in the perimeter of their home and 80.4% of the respondents stated the uncertainties, they faced during the pandemic resulted in constant of feeling anxious. When the nation entered the endemic phase, many regulations and restrictions imposed during the pandemic were lifted by the government, while the new norms continue to be the practice. However, it is crucial to note that the impacts on these aspects have a link to the overall wellness of the community, which requires a multifaceted approach to fully heal.

Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic Towards their Physical and Mental Wellness			
Components of Questionnaire	Percentage (%)		
	Yes	No	Sometimes
Creating a tension with the lack of space during lockdown	46.4	39.3	14.3
Leading to sedentary lifestyle due to movement control order	69.6	30.4	-
Restricting from engaging in physical activities	25	75	-
Increasing the number of screen time	73.2	26.8	-
Preventing from practice a balanced diet and healthy eating	46.4	53.6	-
Experiencing inadequate amount of sleep	28.6	71.4	-
Restricting from engaging in mentally stimulating activities or habit	25	75	-
Lacking routine daily affected the lifestyle	44.6	14.3	41.1
Encourage to observe the hygiene diligently	89.3	10.7	-

The well-being of the community has a direct link to the socioeconomic of the society, where the result suggested the respondents with lesser impacts on the socioeconomic practicing balanced lifestyle and minimal stress. Having a conducive workplace at home continues to be a struggle, even after the end of the pandemic. With the needs of proper workstation and sharing the space with family members, 60.7% experienced tension with the lack of space during lockdown. In regard to the physical well-being, 69.6% of the respondents believed that the Movement Control Order imposed by the government restricted their movement and causing them to fall in the rut of sedentary lifestyle while 73.2% observed the increased number of screen time during pandemic. 85.7% of the respondents also believed that the lack of daily routine affecting their lifestyle. Without healthy routines to manage stress, chronic stress can lead to anxiety disorders, depression, and other mental health issues. A lack of routine that includes social interaction can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, increasing the risk of depression and anxiety. This matter is also linked to poor physical health which can affect cognitive function, leading to decreased concentration, memory issues, and lower productivity which should be the core function among the demographic targeted group in this research.

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DISCUSSION

A comprehensive approach to addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on community, comprises of working community and higher-education students in terms of their socioeconomic status and well-being should be multi-dimensional, incorporating immediate relief, long-term support, and systemic changes, in building a resilient and thriving community as aimed in Sustainable Development Goals. With the recorded higher income groups and better opportunities in one of the most developed areas of the country, it is evident that they are a vulnerable community impacted by the pandemic, which suggests the bigger threats and problems in less developed parts of Malaysia. Building a resilient community and providing better relief and long-term support to the targeted demographic require several pragmatic approaches to be implemented.

Government should play a role in handling the bigger picture in aiding the issue. Implementing policies to protect jobs, such as wage subsidies, unemployment benefits, and support for businesses to prevent layoffs and aiding SMEs could help the vulnerable communities. Advocate for labor policy reforms that provide better protection and benefits for workers, including paid sick leave, unemployment insurance, and healthcare. For the organizations and companies, the shift of focus in operation should be increased in providing access to training programs that help employees acquire new skills relevant to the evolving job market, to make up for the lost time during pandemic. Ensuring that employees have the necessary tools and resources to work effectively from home, including high-speed internet, laptops, and ergonomic furniture deemed necessary, especially for the companies who continue to practice WFH, remote working or rotation basis working arrangements. Encourage businesses to adopt corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that support their employees and the wider community.

For students in higher-education, availability of financial aid, scholarships, and grants to support vulnerable and marginalized students facing economic hardship should be the top priority as the pandemic created a digital divide causing the gap in the performance in the academic scene, not only in Malaysia but also worldwide. Advocate for education policy reforms that prioritize equitable access to quality education, including funding for public schools and universities. For the students who graduated during or after the pandemic, workshops, or programs in helping their academic or work force direction are crucial, as it could help navigating their way in the industry. Provide robust career guidance and counseling services to help students navigate the changing job market and plan their future careers.

The continuous length of pandemic and lockdown in Malaysia also created anxiousness towards the uncertainties of the situation. Having access to robust health and safety measures in workplaces to protect employees and students from COVID-19 and other health risks could minimize the impacts faced by the community. Providing accessible mental health resources in workplace or educational institutions, including counseling, therapy, and stress management programs, while integrating health education into the workplace practice and curriculum. Fostering community support networks within organizations to provide peer support and a sense of belonging could be used to ease the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic towards the community. Establish peer support groups and mentoring programs to provide social and academic support, while developing inclusive policies that support diverse employees, ensuring equity in recovery efforts. For the students in academic institutions, participation in extracurricular activities, both virtual and in-person, could promote social engagement and personal development in eliminating loneliness and sense of loss due to the pandemic.

Leveraging technological access and digital literacy out of the community could work into the advantage in the process of recovering from the impacts of the pandemic. It is also crucial to note that vulnerable groups of students or workers who have disadvantages during the pandemic could use training programs to enhance digital literacy and proficiency in using remote work tools. Proper learning platforms and training for the educators could be implemented, to enhance the effectiveness of online education and developing online learning platforms that are accessible, user-friendly, and interactive. These approaches could promote a culture of continuous learning and development to ensure that employees remain adaptable and resilient, while building resilient education systems that can swiftly adapt to disruptions, including the development of hybrid learning models.

Limitation of study

One of the primary limitations of this research is the lower-than-anticipated survey response rate. Although the target was to collect responses from 383 individuals, the study managed to gather only 336 numbers of total respondents. Despite our efforts to distribute the survey widely, there may have been challenges in reaching certain segments of the target population within the Kuala Lumpur Golden Triangle. These challenges include limitations in digital access, language barriers, or simply the non-participation of certain demographics who are less engaged with online surveys. With the work-rotation and hybrid working arrangements by the involved parties, the collected data during the duration of the surveys fall shorter than intended. While the survey was designed to be user-friendly, there might have been aspects that discouraged completion, such as the length of the survey or the complexity of questions. Future iterations of this research could benefit from pre-testing the survey to identify and mitigate such issues.

Despite these limitations, the data collected from the 336 respondents provides valuable insights into the preferred working arrangements of the community in the Kuala Lumpur Golden Triangle in striving for work-life balance. However, readers should interpret the findings with an understanding of these constraints and consider them when generalizing the results to the broader

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population. Future research should aim to address these limitations by implementing strategies to enhance response rates, such as prolonged data collection periods, more targeted outreach efforts, and iterative improvements in survey design. Additionally, exploring alternative data collection methods or mixed-method approaches could enrich the understanding and robustness of the findings in this area, while broadening the demographic to the wider population in the future research.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the socioeconomic and well-being of employees and students in the Golden Triangle Kuala Lumpur. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated effort from government bodies, educational institutions, employers, and the community. By implementing pragmatic and collective approaches, it is possible to mitigate the negative impacts and build a more resilient and supportive environment for all individuals. The pandemic has led to considerable economic challenges, including job losses, reduced income, and financial instability. These economic disruptions have exacerbated social inequalities and increased the vulnerability of many individuals. The social isolation, uncertainty, and stress caused by the pandemic have significantly affected mental health and well-being. Employees and students reported increased levels of anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness.

From an economic standpoint, employees struggled to maintain a balance between professional responsibilities and personal life, particularly those working from home without appropriate support systems. This imbalance has contributed to burnout and decreased productivity. Students faced substantial difficulties in adapting to remote learning environments, which often lacked adequate resources and support. This has led to learning gaps and decreased academic performance, further affecting their future prospects.

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