**Research Article**

**Impact of COVID Pandemic on Graduating Senior Nursing Students: A Qualitative Study**

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**Abstract**

COVID-19 was classified as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) and Center for Disease Control (CDC) in March of 2020. With this pandemic came many feelings of uncertainty, fear, isolation, and other emotions. A pandemic with ever changing guidelines created a constant state of anxiety. The COVID-19 virus, is a highly contagious respiratory virus. In March 2019, senior nursing students in the program were excited for spring break. It was during spring break that University executive decisions were enacted to promptly change all courses to remote learning in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and protect students, faculty, and staff. New teaching methods along with total separation of the students from the program contributed to stress and uncertainty. As the days rolled by, we thought perhaps there would be an opportunity for a return to campus for closure, but that did not happen. The qualitative method of phenomenology was selected to identify and explore senior nursing students’ lived experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy was applied to the study due to the focus on perception and phenomenology. Senior nursing students alluded to their disappearance “Electronically” without formal farewells. In the study four main themes surfaced. The themes are Missing out, Robbed/Cut short of being a senior student, Emotions/Feelings, and Education.

**Keywords:** Feeling robbed; Missed celebrations; Remote learning; The fear of missing out

**Introduction**

During the spring of 2019, the COVID-19 virus impacted the world. The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) originated in Wuhan China. COVID-19 was classified as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) and Center for Disease Control (CDC) in March of 2020. With this pandemic came many feelings of uncertainty, fear, isolation, and other emotions. A pandemic with ever changing guidelines created a constant state of anxiety. The COVID-19 virus, is a highly contagious respiratory virus. The national and state guidelines required social distancing, wearing face masks, sanitizing and handwashing, and strict quarantine for those with the diagnosis [1,2].

Traditionally during the final semester of our BSN nursing program, senior nursing students are involved with group projects, capstone clinicals, and planning their pinning ceremony. After Spring break 2019, the University closed and faculty quickly transitioned to remote teaching and other platforms such as Zoom as alternative methods to deliver content for all undergraduate courses. The abrupt halt to the normal activities created uncertainty for all.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of graduating senior nursing students during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2019, senior nursing students in the program were excited for spring break. Little did anyone know when we left for spring break, we would not return to campus the remainder of the semester. It was during spring break that University executive decisions were enacted to promptly change all courses to remote learning in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and protect students, faculty, and staff.

**Phenomenology**

The qualitative method of phenomenology was selected to identify and explore senior nursing students’ lived experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy was applied to the study due to the focus on perception and phenomenology. Perception according to Merleau-Ponty [3] is important in phenomenology because it allows perceived experiences of events in the world to identify our knowledge of what is real. “We never cease living in the world of perception, but we go beyond it in critical thought” [4].

The philosophy of phenomenology allows us to consider perception along the grounds of body, time, others, and world. For example, how the “Body” perceives emotions or speaks may be determined by the world around it, that is the body and the world interact. Time is a component of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach. He describes “Time” as a subjective experience. Some moments in time may stand out more than others. Merleau Ponty describes “Others” as connections that we make and the relationships we establish as we interact with others through life each day. People come into our life and are involved with our personal experiences each day. We form relationships with others. Students forms strong bonds during nursing school and some may be friends for life.

As for intentionality or “World”, we are all in the world and inseparable from it. All perceptions and interactions occur in the world. Near the end of the semester, official University decisions had been made to cancel large gatherings such as the pinning and graduation ceremonies due to public safety. University classes and activities were transferred to remote learning. The students experienced the final weeks of their senior semester at home and away from their classmates and faculty; time was interrupted. The time required for classes, group projects, and capstone clinicals became restructured. Time with others in the halls, in the classrooms, stopped. Their “World” was changed, with little hope of a return to what was considered to be normal or expected.

**Method**

A qualitative design using the method of phenomenology was chosen to understand the lived experience of the graduating nursing students during the COVID-19 pandemic from their perspective. The study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a closed University, all correspondence with participants was completed in electronic format. The senior nursing class was sent an email invitation to participate in the study. Graduating senior nursing students were the only students invited to participate in the study. The class consisted of 32 seniors. A separate email address was established for students participating to return all consent forms. This address was also used to email the research questions to the students and where all responses were returned electronically. All electronic correspondence was secure and confidential.

**Two questions were asked:**

Describe factors that have affected you as a graduating senior nursing student during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

What was your experience as a graduating nursing student and how were you affected by the COVID-19 pandemic factors you described.

As faculty studying this phenomenon, we had to bracket our personal feelings regarding the sudden changes made during the pandemic. We discovered in a bracketing interview it was difficult to separate our feelings experienced during the pandemic from what the students described. However, we focused on the student responses and the experiences shared from those who participated. The students who participated returned the questions electronically with very detailed written responses. Each student name on the electronic response was assigned a letter once it was received. Out of 32 students, nine participated in the study. Letters A through I were assigned to the students and were used as code names. Student names and identifiers were removed from all electronic responses received. Two researchers read each student’s electronic response out loud to fully understand each personal experience. The readings allowed the researchers to fully engage in the participants’ written words of their perceived experiences.

Students provided detailed responses about their personal experiences. They shared their feelings and perspectives about the pandemic regarding the abrupt changes implemented during the semester. Examples of these abrupt changes included the shift to remote learning and projects and presentations that were submitted electronically. Course exams were transferred to an online format within a computer program unfamiliar to them. This caused anxiety for many students and that anxiety projected further with concerns for National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) preparation and job applications. Sudden changes due to the pandemic have been reported as impacting the psychological impact of students and others in the work environment [2].

Senior nursing students alluded to their disappearance “Electronically” without formal farewells. The traditional ending culminates with excitement, a professional pinning ceremony, and the University commencement full of pomp and circumstance. Students discussed their experience of having a cap and gown, a nursing stole, but no photos of their memories. Nothing happened in the traditional fashion. The University as well as the nation was under cautious guidelines for safety to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

In our study, new teaching methods along with total separation of the students from the program contributed to stress and uncertainty. As the days rolled by, we thought perhaps there would be an opportunity for a return to campus for closure, but that did not happen. In the study four main themes surfaced. The themes are Missing out, Robbed/Cut short of being a senior student, Emotions/Feelings, and Education. A literature review was conducted in CINAHL, PubMed, and other databases to identify the concepts and descriptions for each theme.

**Themes**

**Missing Out**

The student participants all perceived they had “Missed Out” or “Missed” a variety of opportunities. Each discussed their personal feelings of what they felt they had missed. The fear of missing out has become a common term used by many to describe school, life, work, and social events. Patrick McGinnis wrote an op-ed using the phrase fear of missing out while attending Harvard Business School in 2004 [5]. He described the fear of missing out as it related to busy schedules and the fear of missing out on social events. The fear of missing out however is a common experience identified by young people especially college students and may lead to stress, anxiety and depression [6,7].

The fear of missing out has also been described as personal needs not being met, therefore leaving the feeling of lower life satisfaction, which may cause anxiety [8]. Currently, the fear of missing out has been described by some as a feeling of apprehension that others may be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent [8]. In the literature the concept of fear of missing out has been attributed mainly to the use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram [8,9]. In this example, people see others posting activities or nice photos which may cause them to feel they are not having those experiences or due to spending hours on social media some miss out on interactions with others. The fear of missing out in the workplace has also been a factor that may be associated with negative outcomes such as stress and burn out in some individuals [10-12].

The fear of missing out has been described as not being able to be involved with what is going on, or missing out on experiences, which may contribute to anxiety [13,14]. During the pandemic, there were very limited contacts with friends and no scheduled events, including ceremonies such as pinning and graduation. Social isolation may contribute to the fear of missing out by not being with others. The fear of missing out has contributed to negative aspects regarding well-being and mood [15-19].

Many of the students felt they had “Missed Out” on being a senior in a University setting. The students described in detail about missing out on the pinning and graduation ceremonies. Every student participating responded in detail of how they missed out on many things. Some shared experiences of “Missing” and others shared their perception of “Missing Out” when pouring their personal experiences into the written responses. Graduating from nursing school is a grand achievement and they missed out on it.

**Missed Celebrations**

“Like running a marathon with no cheering and no celebration after”

For the senior nursing students there were no celebrations. The students felt they had missed out on the experiences of happiness and accomplishments shared with friends during a pinning and graduation ceremony. Student D, Canceling of graduation and pinning were hard to take in, these two functions are supposed to celebrate all of our hard work to get to this point. School nursing pins had been ordered for the pinning ceremony at the beginning of the spring semester. Nursing stoles, caps and gowns had been ordered for graduation, and were never worn. Parties, pictures, and group farewells with friends did not happen. They missed taking photos of everyone dressed in graduation regalia. They missed walking across the stage and being pinned. Student B, It’s so much different getting your stole, pin, regalia mailed to you, because I was going to wear them at one point.

They missed the photos that could tell the story of their celebration to share through the years. Student G, Not graduating with a ceremony feels odd; like running a marathon with no cheering and no celebration after; it is so strange to me just because it feels like there isn’t closure to this phase of my life. There were no pictures of this momentous occasion to post on social media. Every student described missing the pinning ceremony and missing the graduation from the University. Student F, Overall, as a nursing student I have missed out on many “Lasts” that I can’t make up. For some student participants, they were first generationcollege graduates, yet no graduation ceremony and no pictures. Missing these milestones in life caused a great sense of sadness for the students. Student E, I had so many plans for my graduation and pinning ceremony. I needed to go to these events so my children could see what all of the days and nights of not playing with them was amounting to.

Student H, I think one of the most difficult for me was the canceling of the pinning and graduation ceremonies. For me personally this was a big deal. I gave up a career as a teacher, my husband has worked two jobs. Pinning and graduating felt like the finish line, a time to celebrate all the work and sacrifices that it took to get here, and when this was taken away it was really disheartening. I really felt like my friends and I had to grieve this loss.

Student I, It’s heartbreaking to me because I have a big family that loves me, and I just wanted to see them all in the crowd as I was getting pinned. I wanted to hear them shouting my name as I walked across the stage. Nursing school is the hardest thing I have ever done, and reaching my goal and graduating during a pandemic isn’t the ending I wanted, planned or deserved. This should be a time of complete happiness and relief, instead we are fighting over toilet paper and wearing masks to Walmart.

**Missed Closure**

Student C, The manner in which we stopped in-person classes made me feel like I was missing out on a big part of my college experience.

The students also described missed clinical opportunities. The capstone clinicals are the last stepping stones of building confidence and gaining knowledge prior to entering the workforce. Preceptors are assigned and students are allowed to increase their learning practice during these special clinicals. However due to the pandemic, all capstone clinicals in our area were canceled. Student F, By missing out on those clinical days, I feel I missed out some learning opportunities and skills. In normal situations capstone clinicals are an opportunity for students to be recruited for jobs. Student E, Not being able to finish my capstone where I was, I feel I missed out on an opportunity to fully learn what I could from the nurses.

**Missed Saying Good-bye**

The students described how they “Missed” saying good-bye to friends made during the program. Friends made during nursing school understand the discipline and hard work on this journey. Student E, Not being able to be with everyone during your last semester of something that we all struggled and fought through to the end has been weighing heavy on me. It was difficult for them to not be able to say good-bye to their peers. Student A, We miss each other. Our classmates are the only ones who understand our daily struggle. Some of the seniors would be leaving and returning to their homes in other cities or states. The students described how they “Missed saying good-by to the faculty.” They missed all of the well wishes that are granted during the closing chapter of leaving the University. Student D, We never got to say a proper goodbye to faculty and friends that we have known the past five years.

Student F, I missed getting to be in a classroom setting with my peers and instructors.

Student G, I was pretty involved on campus so I had lots of friends I played soccer with. I miss being on our beautiful campus and sitting on the balconies watching the movement of campus while I read.

Student A,We didn’t get to experience the true joy of getting to walk out of our last exam, celebrating with our teachers and classmates, we don’t get a true graduation or our own pinning ceremony.

**Felt Robbed and Cut short**

The themes, “Being Robbed” and “Cut Short” were described and used simultaneously with many responses in this study. Several participants used the term, “Cut Short” to define limitations placed on their final clinical experiences.

Student C, Because of COVID-19, everything took a 360 degree spin. Clinical had to be cut shortand all students had to try and get as many clinical days as possible.

Student D, I also feel that it was a detriment to my class because many of the connections that we were building with the staff and management at the hospitals were cut short, and these connections could have landed jobs (now or later in our careers).

Student F, No clinicals-I was really beginning to feel “At Home” with my clinical site. I really wish I could have had an earlier opportunity to meet with the nurse manager of the floor to discuss job potentials. During my clinicals the other nurses highly encouraged that we meet – and of course I never imagined our time would be “Cut Short”.

Student H, in reference to clinical hours being cut short, fifth semester is the time where we, as students, feel like we are gently being pushed out of the nest to spread our wings for the first time. We are given a small amount of freedom to practice with a preceptor. This gives us an idea of what a nurse residency program looks/feels like. Without these hours, it feels slightly overwhelming like we’re being kicked into nursing.

Student A, With finishing the semester in our homes we didn’t get to serve as the “Top Group” for those below us that come to us for help or advice. We didn’t get the exciting finish where we count down the days. Of course our pinning and graduation ceremonies were cancelled. It makes us not really feel like seniors, we were cut short.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary cut short is defined as having to stop doing something before it is finished [5]. As illustrated by student responses the term cut short was used as a verb reflecting the need to terminate or abbreviate “Clinicals” before the intended or proper end. In addition to the use of the term “Cut Short”, the phrase “Robbed” reflected students’ feelings of being cheated, shortchanged, spoiled, even fleeced when clinical experiences were curtailed. Therefore, it was thought that both descriptors should be considered together, one in support of the other. Student E, I know that in the grand scheme of things that I should be thankful that all my friends and family are healthy, and my thoughts and considerations should be directed toward those who are not so lucky, but it is difficult not to feel slightly robbed by this pandemic. Student A, I feel like our role as fifth semester has kind of been robbed from under us. Student H, It is difficult not to feel slightly robbed by this pandemic.

**Feelings/Perceptions: An emotional state or reaction**

Perception involves the way an individual views the world and is unique and individual [20]. The students included many feelings in their responses as they each described their personal experience. These included anxiety, stress, loneliness, grief, fear.

Student B, I’ve been emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausted through this whole process. Anxiety and worry were mentioned often in the participants’ responses. Anxiety and worry have become a part of the pandemic as individuals want to remain safe from COVID-19, yet miss being around others [21,22]. Anxiety has resulted from isolation and lack of face-to-face contact with others [14,23]. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the daily routines of college students globally causing increased levels of anxiety due to the disruption of academic activities [24,25]. Baloran [26] discovered the majority of students felt anxiety during the lockdown when questioned about the psychological and emotional impact during the COVID-19 pandemic. Depression and anxiety have been frequently documented in numerous countries when discussing the COVID-19 virus [27]. College students have also reported anxiety related to quarantine and lack of social stimulation, as well as future employment. Son, et al. [28] surveyed 195 students from a University in Texas with 71% of the students reporting increased levels of stress and anxiety. The students also felt social isolation, depression, and loneliness impacted their overall mental health. Abrupt interruption and cessation of normal routines, especially for college students along with closing the University created much uncertainty and fear. Others have also documented fears, stress and concerns over closing Universities during the pandemic [29-31].

Student I, Instead of having our semester come to a close in an exciting and fun way, it has been stressful.

Reports of loneliness and uncertainty contributed to depressive thoughts in a study conducted of college students during the pandemic [28]. According to Bekhet, et al. [32] loneliness has been described as an emotional state in which an individual feels apart from others yet has a need for others. Student A, We are family, but now we’ve been separated and it feels lonely, we’re completely by ourselves just in our homes.

Student B, All of my faculty have tried to be as supportive and understanding through this whole process, but I have felt incredibly alone.

Social changes such as lockdown, social distancing, face masks, and quarantine created uncertainty and also contributed to stress and anxiety [33,34]. Others report an increase in anxiety and depression among nursing students may have impacted their education [35].

Student A, Not having that physical interaction with each other is depressing. Isolation and quarantine, separation from others during the pandemic caused stress and anxiety, loneliness in people [23,36,37]. Psychological distress can be amplified due to quarantine, fear, and anger [20,23]. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused individuals to have feelings of helplessness due to the danger of the virus, the impact on daily living, and the feelings of isolation [38]. Finnegan described surveying students with 56% responding to feeling socially isolated with online lecture content. Some students also reported a depressing state of mind due to lockdown guidelines in Ireland [39].

Some students experienced grief due to mandatory changes and social isolation due to the pandemic. Grief can be described as an emotional response to a loss, resulting in painful feelings such as sadness, anger and despair when there has been a perceived loss of value [40]. Grief and loss are life events that occur in many situations in life resulting in different feelings for each individual [41]. Student B, Grief was the main emotion felt the second half of the semester. Knowing that my pining and graduation were likely to be canceled, and then were, I have not felt more “Kicked Down” during my schooling.

Student H, I really felt like my friends and I had to grieve this loss.

**Education**

Nursing students who had to convert to remote learning were not positive about this change. It created stress. Others have reported increased stress levels in nursing students due to changes in the academic environment during the COVID-19 pandemic [34,42]. The sudden changes in education and abrupt halt to clinicals in many locations created anxiety in students [25]. Hasan & Bao [43] share results of the findings in their study indicating the fear of academic loss due to ineffective online teaching for college students which has resulted in psychological distress for many.

Student A, Changing formats of our classes really hurt me academically in pediatrics, because I very much struggle on learning material with little instruction.

Student B, I thrive with face to face learning and so changing to the online-learning was a big adjustment—especially given the fact that our classes and exams are very lecture-heavy.

Student C, It was hard to communicate with (some) faculty about course-related issues.

Student D, Being a senior we already start to falter and lose focus at times and being at home trying to accomplish everything made that ten times worse.

While students remained appreciative of what faculty were doing to assist them with the transition from face-to-face to online presentations, many were anxious about their final preparation for the NCLEX exam and their preparation for practice as a BSN prepared RNs. These concerns were poignantly displayed in the following commentary.

Student I, I was required to do …. simulations. These were actually quite helpful and I feel like they were an excellent learning tool. I did not get to finish my clinical hours so I am somewhat nervous. I also have found that not being in class is a hard learning structure for me which makes me nervous for graduate school (because most programs are at least partially online). In addition, my motivation has tanked. I feel like I have no desire to learn anymore even though inside I do; it’s like my school or academic muscle has atrophied.

Students expressed varying levels of apprehension when faced with the necessity of transitioning into online formats of instruction. As described by Student I, coping with distractions within an unstructured environment along with lack of motivation to complete assignments and prepare for graduation became a source of challenge. The implication of that challenge was not perceived as one that was positive, but one of negativity and perhaps, self-doubt along with isolation from usual sources of motivation. Kalman, et al. [44] expressed similar student reactions in classes consisting of entry level and upper-level chemistry classes. They attributed factors such as time, lack of motivation, attention deficits, and sudden changes from classroom to online learning as key influences that limited students in their efforts to remain engaged with their learning [45,46]. Schlesselman, et al. [47] and Bezerra [48] expressed similar issues reflected in students majoring in nursing and pharmacy programs of study.

**Discussion**

The students experienced the final semester of the nursing program during unprecedented times. The COVID-19 pandemic brought the spring 2019 semester to an abrupt halt. The fear of the unknown along with uncertainty occurring internationally, left all of us shocked and unprepared for the consequences brought on by rapid change and redirection of teaching and learning. The students had many concerns. There were the normal expectations of concern anticipating the NCLEX and job seeking opportunities during a nationwide panic. As faculty coping with this unexpected, invasive crisis; we felt it was important to capture the perceptions of participating senior nursing students caught this web of confusion where there were no existing rules or guidelines for such self-preservation. Reviewing students’ perceptions led us toward a prevailing sense of vulnerability that was expressed by these participants in many forms.

These rich descriptions have raised many concerns and opened the doors of opportunity to ask what could have been done to lessen the blow of such an internationally invasive pandemic? While the prediction of such an event was arguably one of uncertainty, prevailing senses of vulnerability is most telling and deserves recognition and further consideration.

Students revealed that sudden changes in the delivery of their curriculum, particularly within the last semester of their nursing program caused significant alterations in their learning, final preparations of graduation, and job seeking opportunities [49]. The expectations of traditional ceremonies were crushed. The journey to graduation ended abruptly. However, learning was affected, and many students reflected on their inability to be autonomous in this effort. Wang[50] spoke to learning autonomy as students being capable of understanding their own objectives and monitoring and evaluating their accomplishments in relation to their learning goals. The sudden change of circumstance caused by COVID-19 may have revealed that students relied heavily on direction provided by traditional strategies of learning and less on their own self-reliance and abilities as independent scholars.

Many concerns were shared within these expressive student responses. As faculty members, we felt it was most important to record and report students’ reactions to these immediate changes in circumstance so that moving forward, learning may take place and be guided by a more informed sense of direction. We wish to acknowledge and extend our heart-felt thanks to these brave graduates who spent precious time by volunteering to share their experiences as graduates and future members of our BSN, RN nursing community.

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