

Article

Female Higher Education Students' Lived Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case Study Viewed through a Phenomenological Lens

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Abstract: This paper examines the subjective realities of female students in higher education as they navigated their well-being and active lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework, which confronts an often-neglected dimension of our experience—the lived body and the phenomenal world—we aim to inform the development of targeted support and interventions to address the specific needs of female students, in future pandemic times. By exploring how three female students studying sport and recreation in higher education perceived their experiences, this article seeks to shed light on the unique challenges faced by these women in maintaining physical activity, coping with isolation and a change in social networks, and managing their mental health in the context of the pandemic. Understanding these subjective realities (such as isolation, restricted physical activity, and loss of social connections) and interpreting the three students' lived habitats, their bodily responsiveness, and their spontaneity ensures that their experience is heard, and appropriate future support can be given.

Keywords: COVID-19; Merleau-Ponty; perception; higher education; subjective realities; pandemic; female students; physical activity



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the lives of students in higher education, affecting their well-being, social connections, and mental health. Indeed, research studies in higher education in Australia, the UK, and Europe have found that a lack of interaction and lifestyle changes during the COVID-19 pandemic have had negative impacts on well-being [1–3].

This paper adopts a Merleau-Pontyan perspective to explore the subjective realities such as experienced by female students during these challenging times. Merleau-Ponty [4] argues that we should regard the body not as a mere biological or physical unit, but as the body that structures one's situation and experience within the world. Through interpreting the embodied experiences, perceptions, and intersubjective relationships of three female students, we intend to make sense of the environment and the direct engagement perceived by them as they inhabited their new lockdown world during the COVID-19 global pandemic. This article elucidates the potential impacts on the three subjects, their social connections, their physical well-being, and their mental health, all whilst they continued to study in higher education. As a case study, the insights gained from these three female students in a Bachelor of Sport and Recreation undergraduate degree can contribute to the development of tailored interventions and support systems to address the specific challenges faced in higher education during times of lockdowns and other crises.

In this paper, which is part of a larger study, we are focusing in depth on data from three female participants as there is a dearth of literature on female tertiary students undertaking study in sport and recreation during COVID-19 pandemic times [5]. Our research gains insight from the students directly so that their experience is heard, and

appropriate future support can be given. Additionally, as physical health is strongly linked to mental health, the restrictions of lockdown, virtual learning, and a lack of physical activity practiced universally by students during the COVID-19 pandemic [6–8] indicate that researchers need to make sense of the potential struggles that students may experience [1].

Background

During 2020–2021, to minimise the transmission of the COVID-19 virus, nationwide lockdowns of various durations and restrictions were enforced by the New Zealand government [9]. This meant that national and international travel was limited, social and physical distancing measures were implemented, and mass gatherings, such as students on campus, were no longer permitted. As a result, students in higher education experienced an abrupt change in their daily routines. They had limited time outdoors to exercise or socialise, an emergency shift from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning from “home bubbles” (immediate family), and they experienced a decline in their general well-being [10,11].

In the context of the pandemic, students in higher education experienced a disruption in their social networks, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness [12]. However, as Pandya and Lodha’s [12] research with Indian tertiary students suggested, the affiliations created through digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic were actually able to alleviate somewhat a sense of isolation and foster social connections. Our study attempted to consider this, along with the potential impact of limited physical interactions and the absence of shared physical spaces on female students’ social connections. This article will examine the embodied experiences of longing for connection/s, the challenges in maintaining relationships and physical activity in a predominantly virtual environment, and the impact that this can have on female students’ mental well-being.

In New Zealand, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning across all educational institutions by imposing restrictions on access to on-campus face-to-face delivery for a period of up to two years from March 2020 [13,14]. This required learning establishments such as schools and tertiary institutions to close for on-campus activity. Lecturers in higher education were advised to provide “blended and online learning opportunities”, creating a virtual learning environment, which, for many, was unprecedented [11,15]. When restrictions eased and self-isolation was not required in community settings, restrictions such as track and trace options, social distancing, and high levels of hygiene were still required [11]. Consequently, learning in the context of a Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR) degree, where physical engagement in human movement studies is paramount, was highly compromised.

2. Literature

2.1. COVID-19 in Higher Education

There is limited in-depth research on the impacts of the COVID-19 lockdowns on higher education students in New Zealand regarding their lifestyles and the impact that this has had on their overall well-being. Most of the literature is focused on the impacts on higher education students from an academic lens from countries such as Spain, Hungary, Australia, China, Bangladesh, and India [1,2,6,7,16]. However, due to the restrictions introduced with COVID-19 in Australia, Enari and Faleolo [17] have explored Pacific peoples’ responses to changes and uncertainties, discovering connections through spirituality and community.

Other current literature states that many negative behavioural impacts have been observed in children, youth, and adults alike [18]. Moreover, Thorpe et al. [5], in their focus on women’s sport, fitness, and well-being during the pandemic, suggest that the negative social, economic, and health effects of COVID-19 have been felt disproportionately by marginalised groups, particularly women. Despite this study focusing on 17 women sport and fitness professionals in New Zealand, we can assume a correlation to female students studying sport and recreation in higher education, as being part of this marginalised group.

Heal et al. [19] undertook studies in Canadian children and found that activity participation in children and youth had declined significantly. Another Canadian study from Moore et al. [20] identified that more than 30% of young females were less interested in playing sports compared to pre-pandemic times. Issues such as unhealthy eating habits, decreased moderate to vigorous physical activity levels, increased digital screen time, and other mental health issues were all identified as factors that impacted youth and adult lifestyles during the COVID-19 pandemic [21–23]. Feminist research across an array of disciplines has examined the impacts of the pandemic on girls, women, and older women's experiences of well-being, with social isolation, loneliness, domestic abuse, increased domestic labour, job losses, and financial strain and insecurity all taking significant tolls [24].

Current research and understandings of well-being during the pandemic are growing [2,24–26]. In this paper, we reimagine and use the term “well-being” from McLeod's (2017) definition as cited by Coffey [25], p. 70, as being a “non-personal capacity” that is assembled through the dynamics of everyday life, rather than something that can be “possessed by” the body of an “individual subject”. Despite acknowledgment that COVID-19 disrupted, challenged, and changed people's understanding of well-being, guidelines and recommendations for improving health in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns are limited. Therefore, much of the research encourages support for higher education students through targeted exercise programmes and therapy [6–8]. The gap in the current literature specifically regarding female higher education student experiences in pandemic times revolves around the concept of isolation, disengagement in physical activity, and social exclusion [5,27–29]. Through adopting a Merleau-Pontyan [4] perspective, this is something that we aim to explore through this case study.

2.2. Isolation

COVID-19 lockdown measures enforced by governments worldwide have affected human behaviour and lifestyles drastically. Indeed, Thorpe et al. [25] state that, because of restrictions, significant swathes of humanity have experienced a profound interruption in social order and cultural formations and practices. They suggest that, during the pandemic, established conventions such as speaking, moving, and connecting have been redefined [24]. Indeed, in research undertaken in diverse countries such as South America and Europe, areas of significant impact included dietary intake, sleep, stress, social connectedness, and the use of substances such as alcohol and tobacco [6,21,30]. One major area was the effect that the closure of entertainment businesses and other organisations had on the emotional well-being and social connectedness of those in lockdown. This closure led to feelings of social isolation due to the restriction of movement in the community, which resulted in a reduction in social activity among family and friends [31]. Fortunately, with modern technology, Doraiswamy et al. [31] stated that these social connections were able to be somewhat maintained from a distance. Of importance was the increase in the use of digital technologies in workplaces, classrooms, and social settings, as Enari and Faleolo [17] and Pandya and Lodha [12] noted. Examples of digital spaces, such as social media (Instagram and Facebook) and other online communication platforms (Messenger and Zoom), were used to connect with friends and family. This minimised the feelings of social isolation. Much of the literature also noted an increase in screen time and social media use, particularly amongst young adults. However, this also had a negative impact on how they viewed their quality of life and increased their anxiety [12,16,31]. Furthermore, an increase in alcohol consumption and other harmful substances, an increase in sleep time, and a reduction in physical activity were also observed amongst young adults [31,32]. It is evident from our research that the lifestyles of youth, students, and adults alike have been negatively impacted by the many restrictions that the COVID-19 lockdowns have caused.

2.3. Disengagement

University students are a vulnerable demographic group for inadequate physical activity levels [7]. Therefore, the COVID-19 restrictions created concern regarding their health and

physical activity behaviours during and post lockdowns. The effect of restricted physical activity is something that our study will examine. It is observed globally that there has been a reduction in the physical activity levels of youth and students around the world and an increase in sitting time and sedentary behaviour [7,8,28]. There is a link between these negative and harmful habits, such as increased screen time and the consumption of unhealthy foods, and mental health declines for university students [7]. Doraiswamy et al. [31] suggest that the negative effect of lockdowns impacted lifestyle factors such as diet, physical activity, sleep, stress, social connectedness, and the use of tobacco, alcohol, and other harmful substances. In a time of social and health crisis, the importance of maintaining a routine to remain healthy is paramount. However, with people facing extended periods of social and physical isolation, adaptation was key. Thorpe et al. [33] discuss how the physically active body prompted a new awareness of boundaries and risks during COVID-19 lockdown periods. People were more aware of breathing and sweat in different spaces of physical activity, evoking new ethical and moral boundaries of risk.

2.4. Social Exclusion

Rogowska et al. [29] suggest that university students are more likely to experience mental health issues than any other population. Moreover, there has been a documented decline in students' mental health since the beginning of COVID-19 [2,16]. Wilson et al. [3], in a study of Australian and Singaporean students, found four areas that impacted student well-being—engagement, awareness, socialising, and environment. Students had difficulty creating social connections and felt disconnected. Each of the lifestyle factors for young adults and higher education students are influenced by one another, which only highlights the significance of recognising behaviour and balancing life during pandemic times. Therefore, for a vulnerable group without well-consolidated habits, such as university students, an additional emphasis and education should be directed towards self-care, social relationships, and healthy lifestyles [11,21,33].

In New Zealand, Thorpe et al.'s [25] research examined women's reimagining of well-being within the radically altered social world of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown period for these women was intense, with women grappling with dis/continuity and dis/orientation in their unsettled lives. What emerged was new relations of connection and closeness during periods of social isolation. This correlates with some of the results found in our study, where female students' isolation and lack of social connections either had a positive or negative effect on their mental health and well-being.

Importantly, female students who are studying in a movement-orientated context such as a sport and recreation degree are more likely to be cognizant of their bodies and well-being during times of crises; therefore, this article fills a gap in the literature. Young people's voices are rarely heard in educational and sport research, even though they are important to the education process and directly affect it [34,35]. Importantly, Thorpe (cited in SportNZ) [36] suggests that the disruption to active recreation for everyone (including girls and young women) during the two years of the pandemic may have lasting effects on their engagement with sport.

3. Theoretical Framework

Merleau-Ponty's discourse on phenomenology emphasises the embodied nature of human existence and highlights the importance of bodily attention, social connections, and relatedness to the surrounding world [4,37]. This will provide the theoretical framework for this article. Despite phenomenology not being strong in the broader context of human movement studies [38], the framework underpinning this article will draw on the philosophical perspective of phenomenology, as well as drawing on it as a methodology within a case study. We provide discussion of the COVID-19 period of lockdowns and share the lived experiences that existed in the social world of three female subjects. The philosophy underpinning Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is ideal because it aligns with embodied experiences and recognises that our understanding of the world is inseparable

from our lived experiences and engagement with the environment. Merleau-Ponty's [4], p. xi, concept of perception is manifested in both bodily capacities and dispositions as it grounds the basic forms of all human experience and understanding. He states that "the phenomenon of perception is therefore ubiquitous—not just in sense experience, but in our intellectual, social, personal, cultural, and historical self-understanding, all of which are anchored in our bodily being in the world".

All three case study subjects were in their first or second year of a Bachelor of Sport and Recreation undergraduate degree and therefore embodied experiences in movement studies and well-being [26,39] axiomatic for them. Thus, a phenomenological approach to embodied learning, as Standal and Engelsrud [40], p. 162, suggest, is the researcher seeing the subject as an "experiencing agent" that enacts the inward processes and the outward processes of their lived habitat. The case study subjects described their experiences as very real to them. The pandemic was an actual moment in time (a phenomenon); therefore, it did not diminish the subject's perceived reality.

Carman, cited in Landes' translation of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* [4], p. xiii, states that the central insight about perception is that whilst it is essentially bodily, it is both "intentional and bodily" as it is the skilful bodily responsiveness and spontaneity resulting from a direct engagement with the world. Our (the researchers) interpretation of this perceived bodily responsiveness from each of our subjects' habitats during the COVID-19 pandemic may elucidate the development of targeted support and interventions to address the specific needs of female students studying in higher education in future unprecedented times.

Kerry and Armour, as cited in Standal and Engelsrud [40], state that there is a distinction between phenomenology as philosophy and as a methodology. However, for the purpose of this article, the framework will be phenomenology, and because the case study focuses on a "phenomenon" (COVID-19 virtual learning environment) at a specific point in time, it too will contribute to and inform the methodology. The methodology enables us to interpret the subjective experiences of the participants from an embodied perspective (bodily action and thought) as they studied in a Sport and Recreation undergraduate degree. In this instance, we refer to the phenomenology of perception (both intentionally and bodily) as something that is vital in arriving at an understanding of the perceptual experience as it was "lived through" our subjects' world [41], p. 122. Indeed, Spatz [42] states that embodied methodologies are increasingly prevalent in the social sciences, cultural studies, and psychology. In this article, we focus on our subjects' embodied learning and their perceived realities as we try and make sense of what they experienced as they navigated their higher education study during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Methods

This article, utilising a case study method, explores the experiences of three participants who were part of a wider qualitative research project on higher education student voices. This research project draws on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework [4] using a qualitative methodology [43]. A case study approach [44,45] was used as a contextual study to investigate a phenomenon in a real-life context, namely the COVID-19 pandemic and the responses to imposed restrictions, by the three subjects.

4.1. Sample

As previously stated, this article will focus in depth on data from three female participants who were part of the larger student voice study. The study consisted of 16 undergraduate university students who were in various stages of completing a Sport and Recreation undergraduate degree during the COVID-19 lockdown periods in 2020–2021.

Our aim was to source and highlight pre-emptive and non-pre-emptive issues experienced by first-year university students, during pandemic times in 2020–2021.

The study was undertaken at the end of 2021, almost two years after the COVID-19 lockdowns started in 2020. All students (n 120) in the School of Sport and Recreation with a first year of study commencing in 2020 were invited to participate in the study. An announcement posted by a school administrator on the school's homepage in the learning platform (Blackboard) informed them of the study; however, only 16 responses were received. Of these 16 responses received, 13 were first-year students in 2020 and three were second-year students. It was agreed by the researchers that all 16 students could be included as they had been subjected to the same conditions over the two years. Ethical considerations were followed to reduce or eliminate the potential risk or harm. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. This meant that all students were voluntary participants, they agreed to participate by signing an informed consent form, and they were promised anonymity and confidentiality. All subjects were provided with a pseudonym to protect their identity and privacy.

4.2. Subjects

Two of the three subjects in this case study were in their first year of university during the 2020 year, with the other subject in her second year. All were studying for a Bachelor of Sport and Recreation degree, were living at home with their parents during 2020–2021 and had pseudonyms to preserve their identity. Firstly, Sara was of NZ European descent and a track athlete. Moana (the other first year student) was of Māori/Pacific/NZ European heritage and involved in rowing and coaching, and, lastly, Holly was an NZ European, a second-year student, and a nutrition major.

4.3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews [45] were conducted in 2021 and early 2022 with 16 participants. These interviews, except for two, were conducted online through the software programme Zoom. The interview questions provoked thoughts about their lifestyles, their active lives, and their university study during the COVID-19 pandemic years. Roulston [46] highlighted the value of open questions for semi-structured interviews, often preceding follow-up questions or “probing” to gain clarification or to explore themes further. All interviews were recorded electronically on a laptop and then transcribed using the Otter.ai software. The transcripts were then edited to ensure that the wording and sentences were correct and made sense as Māori words (one of New Zealand's official languages) and concepts may have been used. All edited transcripts were uploaded into an NVivo software programme for coding and sub-coding in preparation for data analysis.

4.4. Data Analysis

Using thematic analysis [47,48] and a semantic approach [47] to draw meaning from the data, patterns of meaning from across the data set were identified. Patterns were identified through a rigorous process of data familiarisation, data coding, and theme development and revision. One of the advantages of Braun and Clarke's [48] thematic analysis is that it is theoretically flexible. This means that it can be used within different frameworks—hence its use in our study. The original study's research question, “What are university students' responses to the unexpected and unprecedented measures imposed on their lifestyles (displacement), livelihoods (employment), and higher education experiences (online learning) during the COVID-19 pandemic?”, was addressed. Table 1 shows the themes and sub-themes that emerged in the wider study. However, for the purpose of this case study, only the themes of social connections, mental health, and physical activity re discussed.

4.5. Validation

Ethics approval was sought and subsequently provided by the University Ethics Committee (AUTEK) to undertake a study on university students' responses to the unexpected and unprecedented measures imposed on their lifestyles (displacement), livelihoods

(employment), and higher education experiences (online learning) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Member checking occurred between authors at all stages of data collection, collation, analysis, interpretation, and writing. The student voice study was designed to validate student voice data against an earlier autoethnographic account by the authors [11].

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes identified in original study (Godber and Atkins, 2021).

Overarching Themes	Disruption of Learning, Lifestyles, Livelihood				
Themes	Family/Extended Family	Social Connections/Networks	Mental Health	Physical Activity/Exercise	Reflective Practice
Sub-Themes	Time Devices Internet Catching COVID Responsibilities Blurred boundaries	Working Social Media Systems engagement	Stress Anxiety Disengaged Mindset Student allowance Government subsidy	Studying Space & equipment Motivation	Goals Routine Media

5. Findings

In this section, we introduce the three subjects and findings from the three main themes: physical activity, social connections, and mental health. The findings illustrate some of the perceptions, experiences, and unique challenges faced by the three female students in undertaking physical activity, maintaining social connections, and managing their mental health in the pandemic years, all whilst studying in higher education.

5.1. Themes

The codes generated from the data collected from 16 transcripts were examined to identify significant broader patterns of meaning. Consequently, themes and sub-themes were developed (see Table 1). Adopting a semantic approach [46] to draw meaning from the data, the researchers clustered together themes that were pertinent to both the research question and the data collected. These themes were pertinent to shed light on the unique challenges faced by female students in the context of the pandemic. A sample of the direct quotes from the transcribed interviews is used to illustrate the subjects’ perceptions of their lives under each of the three themes selected for this case study. Additional discourse will be included in the Section 6 as we interpret the subjective realities of our three female students.

5.1.1. Theme One: Physical Activity

University students are a vulnerable demographic group for inadequate physical activity levels [7]. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions have created concern amongst researchers regarding their health and physical activity behaviours during and post lockdowns. It has been observed globally that there has been a reduction in the physical activity levels of youth and students around the world, and an increase in sitting time and sedentary behaviour, during pandemic times [7,8,28]. Our subjects validated this as follows.

“ at times like, I’d turn around and be like, I don’t really want to go out today. But I still went out anyway, just because it was like, well you got to do it. And it’s gonna be good for you”. (Sara)

“Physically, I felt like I never really did a lot of like heavy exercise, I never had weights before lockdown. So, I bought like two five kg dumbbells and an 8 kg kettlebell. And I was just like, let me just try out some exercises. So, I started doing that during lockdown. That was like beginning of—like March 2020. Um, yeah. And my physical, my physical well-being, I think I actually improved a lot more physically”. (Holly)

“It was just not being able -I was finding it a lot harder to maintain a routine”. (Moana)

“Like, after my run, I’d come back, and I’d just feel so much better. Like, I’d feel like I was a better person for not only myself, but also for my family. Like I was able to kind of be there for everyone else as well, as well, rather than being selfish and just venting all the time”. (Holly)

“It was hard to get motivated training alone and not in a group”. (Sara)

5.1.2. Theme Two: Social Connections

COVID-19 lockdown measures enforced by governments worldwide have affected human behaviour and lifestyles drastically. The areas of significant impact include dietary intake, sleep, stress, and social connectedness [1,6,16,21]. One major area was the effect that the closure of entertainment businesses and other organisations had on the emotional well-being and social connectedness of those in lockdown. This closure led to feelings of social isolation due to the restriction of movement in the community, which resulted in a reduction in social activity among family and friends [31]. Moana and Sara shared their perceptions of a change of social networks.

“The only thing for me was not being able to go to work was also like the social thing. Like I was only working there for like a month and a half, but I was really good friends with majority of the people I worked with. That was kind of a pain. But I don’t have anyone that’s financially dependent on me. So that was also probably a good thing. And my parents were very helpful during lockdown in terms of finances”. (Moana)

“For me, the social side and then working side worked quite well together. I love being able to see lots of people and have a good time. But um, we all kept in contact on a group chat and like we would all have a group call like once every few weeks so that was pretty good”. (Moana)

“Being at home with my family, we learnt more about each other and ourselves”. (Sara)

“I’m so used to being around so many different kinds of people, I just felt quite like, not alone because I was in a house with my family”. (Moana)

5.1.3. Theme Three: Mental Health

Government agencies provided practical guidelines and interventions to support those affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns [9,49,50]. However, despite this, university students still experienced a decline in mental health and overall well-being due to the decrease in physical activity and increase in unhealthy behaviours. This, combined with the increased digital screen time to maintain social connections and for online learning, created a degree of anxiety and depressive symptoms for students [8,21,29]. Statements about their feelings and well-being follow.

“For me, personally, my emotional and the mental health kind of went to sh#t [sic] a week before we went into lockdown. One of my closest friends went to America for uni [sic] and because of COVID, she can’t come back for like a year and a half. So that made like the first couple weeks really hard, because I would have gone over to her house, I would have like gone down and sat in our cars or whatever, but we couldn’t have done that so that kind of took a toll”. (Moana)

“I did not know how to regulate my emotions”. (Holly)

“But the majority of it was just the depression and like, feeling like not wanting to get up, you know, like, you’d just be in bed way past, you know, the time you’re supposed to get up. And you’re like, Yeah, I don’t want to do this, you know, like, why am I even here? What’s the point?” (Holly)

“Lockdowns—I think the 21 lockdown was harder. I think 2020 it was very, it was like, Oh, we’ve never had this before. So it’s interesting. Let’s see how it goes. And then towards the end of the year, you’re like, Yeah, okay, I’m kind of sick of it. Like, I don’t want to stay home anymore. I’m sick of my family, like, I just want to leave. And then to

21. *The one in August that one was, yeah, no, I'm not doing this anymore. Like I'm sick. I'm like, can we just leave?"* (Holly)

6. Discussion

This case study specifically examines the lived experiences and subjective realities of three female students in higher education during pandemic times. Our interpretation of their perceived ways of coping with lockdowns and restricted environments, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, clearly show that these female students were subjected to challenges of isolation, disrupted physical activity, and social exclusion. More importantly, as qualitative researchers in the field of movement pedagogy, we were keen to see things as they presented themselves, to “make sense” of the subjects’ worlds and interpret these in relation to other literature pertaining to active lives and lifestyles during COVID-19. We discuss and interpret their perceived challenges in this section.

6.1. Social Exclusion

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception [4,41] underscores the embodied nature of human existence and highlights the importance of social connections. The female students in this study experienced a disruption to their social networks. This section also explores the potential impact of limited physical interactions and describes, through the female students’ voices, the effect of the absence of shared physical spaces on their social connections. For example, Holly could not attend church meetings and found solace in reading her bible. She stated,

“I have my—a really big part of my life is church and my church community. So I couldn’t go to church, I obviously felt discouraged. It was more like a spiritual thing that I was, like, kind of yearning for more encouragement. That was one of them my lifestyle and that was just, yeah, it was terrible”. (Holly)

Indeed, limited physical interactions and the absence of shared physical spaces did create a feeling of isolation and loneliness, as Moana described:

“I’ve just felt quite lonely a lot of the time. And which is something I don’t deal with very well. So that was a bit of a challenge like learning how to actually kind of work through that. Yeah”. (Moana)

She went on to say, “I’m so used to being around so many different kinds of people, I just felt quite like, not alone because I was in a house with my family”. This correlates with Thorpe et al.’s [25] study, where women in the sport and fitness industry found new levels of connection and closeness during periods of social isolation. Despite Moana’s lifestyle being restricted, she too sought solace in her family connections.

Moving learning, training, and research to online environments radically shifted the social dynamics and ways of connecting with others [11]. Chaturvedi et al. [30] found that many university students were likely to suffer from stress, anxiety, and depression, so there is a necessity to provide emotional support to students during unexpected crises. This can be found in creating social networks both within and outside of the restricted environment that a pandemic provides. The three subjects resided within their family homes during the COVID-19 lockdowns, so connections within a family “bubble” (the NZ government’s restricted grouping) had positive and negative outcomes. Sara found it positive, saying “Being at home with my family, we learnt more about each other and ourselves”.

Living with other people can also create a sense of loneliness, something that we discovered when Moana stated,

“I’m so used to being around so many different kinds of people, I just felt quite like, not alone because I was in a house with my family. And that’s been going well, but I’ve just felt quite lonely a lot of the time. And which is something I don’t deal with very well. So that was a bit of a challenge like learning how to actually kind of work through that. Yeah”. (Moana)

Enari and Faleolo [17] also found this when studying Samoan and Tongan people's reactions when living in Australia during the pandemic. However, connecting with others outside of the physical environment was important too. The subjects found that connecting through digital spaces such as social media and other communication platforms was helpful. We concur, as Moana stated,

"For me, the social side and then working side worked quite well together. I love being able to see lots of people and have a good time. But um, we all kept in contact on a group chat and like we would all have a group call like once every few weeks so that was pretty good". (Moana)

Furthermore, Sara and Holly both found, like Moana, that they had to renegotiate social bonds through their online communities, demonstrating, we believe, the importance of social connections.

"I used for the social kind of things, Instagram and messenger because of course, Instagram is like where my most of my friends I've got contact with them. And messenger you can—I kind of like feel like the video call platform is a bit better. And so I use those for my social interaction". (Sara)

"My social well-being was it was all right, like, I mean, I think I kind of made a few friends, a few friends online. And like some of the memes that we'd send to each other, so it kind of kept us you know, like, somewhat happy". (Holly)

6.2. Disrupted Physical Activity

All the female students in our study told us that the opportunity to continue training or to undertake sport or physical activity was restricted for them. For Sara and Moana, who were usually active in their training, coaching, and sport, found adjusting to a restricted regime difficult. Holly alleviated her predicament by purchasing dumbbells online. She said,

"Physically, I felt like I never really did a lot of like heavy exercise, I never had weights before lockdown. So I bought like two five kg dumbbells and an 8 kg kettlebell. And I was just like, let me just try out some exercises. So I started doing that during lockdown". (Holly)

Sara, as a competitive track athlete, found not being able to train with her coach and in her regular environment frustrating. This was highlighted by her comments about others who were less serious about competition encroaching on her training space at the local track.

"Of course, I spoke about the whole crowding situation at the track. And just people because they saw it was a track, though, like, oh, yeah, I'll go use that. But they weren't actually using it for running though using it for other things. Like, we ended up having like fitness groups coming out when they weren't meant to. Or there was like family rugby games. In the middle of the field, there were people just walking in massive groups along the track. And like, when you like, politely ask them to move, they get slightly annoyed at you. And I'm like, Well, I'm here to run, what are you here for?". (Sara)

In other parts of the world, researchers such as Bánhidi and Lacza [6] in Hungary recorded reductions in athletes' training, specificity, frequency, and duration. Washif et al. [51], in their study of 142 countries, found, like Sara, that competitive athletes had a stronger desire to maintain training and had encountered obstacles to training regularly during lockdowns. However, as Bánhidi and Lacza [6] found, their subjects' physical and social health suffered when their regular training was paused. Greenburg et al.'s [52] research on youth athlete motivation, training, and activity progression, during and after COVID-19, found that pandemic-related sports restrictions resulted in a significant reduction in youth athlete conditioning. They stated that athletes preferred instructor-led group training sessions as this was a motivating factor. Sara concurred when she said,

“I didn’t have my coach there, so I didn’t know what kind of technique I had to work on or whether I was doing things the way that he wanted me to do it. And so, I’d have to either message him or then just hope that he understood what I was talking about”. (Sara)

This sense of frustration about restrictions, as perceived by Sara, along with a lack of regular physical activity, can play a part in a person’s mental well-being. Elliot et al. [32] suggest that there has been a decline in mental well-being in youth sport in South Australia because of COVID-19. To alleviate this and the sense of isolation during training, Sara made changes. She stated,

“I was training, and I wasn’t just completely alone. And as things started to ease up, there was two girls that lived in my area that was also my training, and every Saturday would go down to the track and, of course, would socially distance and would do our training then. So it sort of did open up that little social bubble”. (Sara)

The New Zealand physical activity survey data [36] undertaken for the 2020–2021 years states that the average number of hours spent being physically active dropped by 15.6% and that the grouping of 18–24-year-olds (all our three subjects) was more severely affected. However, for both Holly and Moana, physical activity was a coping outlet.

“I found myself wanting to do more physical activity, like than anything else, so I was like craving movement. I’d never been on a run before. But like it was almost every night just going up for at least 20 min. I’m just gone, like out of the house”. (Holly)

“When I couldn’t be bothered going for a walk, I would use the dog so I would go out for a walk with the dog. I don’t know, that just kind of made it like you’re actually doing something helpful or something, if that makes sense”. (Moana)

Sara summed up her feelings about disrupted physical activity and university study during the pandemic by saying,

“Feeling now? I’ve got a few older friends, and they’ve spoken to me about it, in first year of uni, I went out and did this and this and that. And I was just like, Yeah, well, my first like, year at uni, I sat home”. (Sara)

6.3. Isolation

Perception plays a crucial role in shaping our experiences and responses to the world [4,41]. Merleau-Ponty [4,41] emphasises the active and embodied nature of perception. This section explores how the female students in a higher education sport and recreation undergraduate degree coped with the experience of isolation (both bodily and socially) during the pandemic years.

Sara highlighted this feeling of separation when she discussed the degrees of distance when studying in a virtual learning environment.

“I couldn’t be as social with people, especially—in the first lockdown that we had, I hadn’t met anyone from my new classes as of yet. And so, it was a little bit difficult to get to know anyone, just because we were all online. And so it was kind of like we only contacted each other if we like, really needed to. And in the second one, I had already met some of the people and we were starting to form friendships, but then it was like, kind of, we’re still friends, but not as close because we didn’t have that physical contact, we had to rely on video calls and on group messages”. (Sara)

Moana, like Sara, found it hard being alone and trying to do her university work.

“I think for me, it was just having to be in the same room all the time. not have anyone around me because like, I don’t know if this is weird, or I find it easier to work harder when I’m surrounded by people when I’m working”. (Moana)

Hermassi et al.’s [8] research on physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and satisfaction with life in university students in Qatar found that when students were confined and isolated, symptoms of anxiety and depression were prevalent.

“So, it was a little bit hard, especially mentally, because it’s like, you need that social interaction, like with someone outside of like, just online. So yeah, it was a little bit hard, because I was hoping to be able to get to know these people a bit better. But it’s just because we couldn’t, it was like, I don’t know whether it’s going to be the same as next year with them”. (Sara)

Sara, in the quote above, expressed sentiments like that of Hermassi et al. [8], stating her concern about her mental well-being when not being able to work and socialise with her fellow students at university. Moana expressed her feelings by saying simply,

“I’ve just felt quite lonely a lot of the time. And which is something I don’t deal with very well. So that was a bit of a challenge like learning how to actually kind of work through that. Yeah”. (Moana)

Enari and Faleolo [17] and Pandya et al. [12] reiterated that digital spaces, such as social media (Instagram and Facebook) and other online communication platforms (Messenger and Zoom), were used to connect with friends and family in separate bubbles, thus reducing the feeling of isolation. Although digital technology provides avenues to connect socially, the overindulgence in or overuse of digital devices can be harmful in the long term [12]. Holly found that despite being locked down and having access to her friends through social media, she still felt some anxiety.

“But mentally, I was like, there were times where like, I’m pretty sure a lot of other students have expressed this, like depression hit some anxiety, some, just the fear of the unknown”. (Holly)

7. Conclusions

This paper examines the subjective realities of female students in higher education as they navigated their well-being and active lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper aims to inform the development of targeted support and interventions to address the specific needs of female students, in future pandemic times.

Merleau-Ponty’s concept of phenomenological perception has enabled us to consider how “things have made sense” for our three subjects in this case study, as they navigated and inhabited their world during a crisis. As previously inferred, the COVID-19 pandemic was far more than a massive global health problem—it was a crisis on every level: social, cultural, environmental, and economic. Lupton and Willis [53], p. 5, stated that “it is evident that detailed and situated social research is vital to understanding how this crisis was affecting people across the world”. Similarly, Glebova and López-Carril’s [54], p. 807, research on the professional intentions and career pathway vision of sport management students recommended that “sport management curricula and teaching practices address the new demands of the sports industry prompted by the pandemic”. By adopting a Merleau-Pontyan perspective, this paper has offered insights into the subjective realities of female students’ embodied experiences and recognises that our understanding of the world is inseparable from our lived experiences and engagement with the environment. As Merleau-Pontyan states, “the phenomenon of perception is . . . not just in sense experience, but in our intellectual, social, personal, cultural, and historical self-understanding, all of which are anchored in our bodily being in the world” [4], p. xi.

A limitation of this case study research is that it contains in-depth data on only three of the 16 subjects. However, the experiences of Sara, Moana, and Holly correlate with other research that has been undertaken on university students during COVID-19 globally [1,7,8,49,50]. In this article, we have drawn together how female students in higher education have perceived and coped with their experiences and the subjective realities of isolation, disrupted and restricted physical activity, and social exclusion, during the pandemic.

By understanding their lived experiences, educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals can develop targeted interventions and support systems that address the specific challenges faced by female students in higher education, to promote their well-

being and resilience in times of crisis. As Thorpe [36] suggests, young women's engagement in sport and physical activity is a significant contributor to their sense of identity, self-confidence, body image, connection, and belonging. We therefore need to continue to research and listen to their voices and to elucidate the development of targeted support and interventions, thereby addressing the specific needs of female students studying in higher education, in pandemic times. Future research directions include curriculum and policy reforms and innovations in higher education (HE) institutions, and research on "post"-COVID-19 teaching and learning in response to the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions about what has been learned and what measures can be taken to better prepare for future unprecedented disruptions or crises must continue to be asked.

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