A Phenomenological Inquiry of Graduate School Students' Silence in Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract COVID-19 pandemic transformed the way how Higher Education Institutions deliver the teaching and learning process in an online modality. This phenomenological study inquired the lived experiences and the contexts of graduate school students' silence in online learning during the pandemic. Transcendental research design following Moustakas's Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen process was utilized to generate the emerging themes and essence of the study's findings. Eight graduate school students from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Northern Mindanao were selected as participants through purposive sampling. Analysis of data revealed that silence for graduate school students means emotional exhaustion and lack of academic preparedness due to physical, cognitive, and affective factors in online classes. It reflects their struggles in online learning which is the essence of silence. Silence in online learning without these struggles

cannot become an experience of silence. Furthermore, their experiences of silence are diverse depending on how they are shaped or re-shaped by their current contexts. As the study speaks a volume of unfavorable insights on the meaning of silence, an intervention on students' well-being may be proposed to foster a positive disposition in an online learning environment.

Keywords: *graduate education, online learning, phenomenological inquiry, silence, struggles*

Introduction

The rise of online learning in this time of the pandemic is undertaken remotely on digital platforms to bolster the landscape of teaching-learning process in a safe and secure manner. That is, learners and teachers are reading, interacting, or engaging online with the prepared learning packets. In particular, the prevalence of using both synchronous and asynchronous modes of online learning emphasized the flexibility in accessing and engaging with the subject (Cheta and Augustein, 2015; Harasim, 2012; Kyofuna, 2013).

Although engagement in the virtual classroom is well entrenched and enforced by teachers, online learning may reduce and slow the fluency of interaction among learners (Rapanta et al., 2020). This phenomenon is likely to be attributed to silence, a condition in which a person is unable to make any sounds (Zhouyuan, 2016).

In the context of online teaching and learning, silence, though typical to students, is a phenomenon recognized by learners' positive and negative attitudes when interacting virtually with teachers. When this happens, teachers may find it distressing and difficult to gauge as an avalanche of factors may prompt them to question if the

silence is an indication of students' agreement, disinterest, absence, ambiguity, or alienation (Duran, 2020; Mārginean, 2021; Shakir, 2021). This phenomenon shows that students' silence should be understood to prevent misinterpretations.

This students' silence is noticeable in graduate education where modular modality is not practiced and classes are conducted through synchronous learning. Conduct of classes in this modality is very much the same with the face-to-face class except that it is done virtually. This means that there is an expected thread of conversation between teachers and students.

Few studies that investigated the silence of students have already been conducted using different methods, respondents, and aims (Choi, 2015; Coancā, 2020; Juniati et al., 2018; Min, 2016; Nurrohmah & Waloyo, 2021; Wang, 2016; Zhouyuan, 2016). For instance, Gradinaru (2016) observed that silence in online communities happens when members are disinclined to express a viewpoint that does not align with the majority. Hanh's (2020) study described silence as an obstacle in the teaching and learning process, which troubles both teachers and learners. Meanwhile, Al-Halawachy's (2014) study used questionnaires to describe some psychological and pedagogical factors that emerged as the reasons for students' silence. Lastly, Duran's (2020) phenomenological study on the silence of students underscores that learners' silence was a strategy done purposefully. Her study was focused on the silence of students engaged in cohort-based distance learning. Although these studies were about silence, these were not conducted in light of the COVID-19 online class and not with the graduate students as participants of the study. This present study then proves that very little or no empirical research on silence in online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic has been conducted and become the heart of research analyses.

These perspectives espoused by researchers on the occurrence of silence in synchronous online learning are as well observed by the researchers in their graduate classes. Some students do not participate despite being prompted to unmute their audio to convey their ideas. Most of the time, they do not contribute to the discussions not even open their cameras for the entire class period. Some tend to participate but are saddled by other tasks. These observations were used as bases to inquire about the necessity of exploring the experiences and contexts of the participants who exhibit the phenomenon under examination.

Theoretical Framework

This phenomenological inquiry argues that graduate school students' experiences of silence in online learning during the time of pandemic are exhibitions of their challenges.

This argument is supported by the connectivism learning theory of Siemens (2005) and Downes (2005) and Mezirow's transformational learning theory (1991).

The theory of connectivism as a learning philosophy espouses that technology plays a significant role in the learning process where students have ease-of-use access to information. Connectivism primarily builds the notion that technology is changing, what, how, and where students learn. Heavily grounded in technology, Siemens and Downes surmised that connectivism brings students together in creating learning opportunities and experiences. However, epistemological positions of connectivism draws challenges such as lack of solutions to the inconsistency of learning, under-conceptualization of interaction, and inability to explain concept development (Barbera, 2013). This postulation holds true considering that online learning may posit varied experiences to students given that COVID-19

pandemic also affects their mental health and behavior (Shaikh et al., 2021).

The Mezirow's transformational learning theory theorizes that people use their sense experience as a reference for making meaning and learning. More specifically, Mezirow argued that the process of transformational learning begins with the learners' experiences where they can adjust their knowledge based on new information.

In relation to this study, the transition of school to online learning brought by the pandemic paved the way for students to use technology. Within the paradigm of connectivism, the theory seeks to be the solution to the problem of learning as it promotes continual learning through digital channels. In Mezirow's theory, this shift creates and re-creates students' experiences and challenges in learning since knowledge is ontologically known in the context of what they experience. As context shapes one's perception, Duran (2020) exclaimed that the absence of communication in online learning comes across as silence. It is the objective of this inquiry to understand the realities of these ongoing phenomenon in online learning.

Purpose of the Research

This study explored and inquired the lived experiences of graduate school students' silence in online learning during COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it aimed to understand the meaning of their experiences of silence and to ascertain the contexts that are central to their experience of the phenomena.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized transcendental phenomenology, a systematic approach in analyzing data that seeks a deeper understanding and description of meaning of lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994 in Creswell, 2013). This design attempts to describe the experiences of participants on the phenomenon rather than the researcher's interpretation. This method is deemed appropriate for this study as it tries to describe the experiences and the contexts of participants' silence in online learning.

Participants of Study

Following Moustakas' principle of selecting fewer participants in a transcendental phenomenological study, this study purposefully sampled eight graduate school students from the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Northern Mindanao. Purposive sampling in qualitative research involves researchers' sound judgment for the inclusion of a restricted number of people in the study. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: they have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), they were recommended by a fellow professor in the graduate school as students who were likely to be silent most of the time during their classes, they haven't had an experience or encounter with the researchers as their professors in any of their subjects taken in the graduate school of the Arts and Sciences, and lastly, they adhered and signed to the agreement, permission, and ethical concern as stipulated in the informed consent given to them by the researchers. These criteria ensured that participants are suitable in the phenomenon under investigation.

Instrument

This transcendental phenomenology utilized an in-depth semi-structured interview. In this approach, researchers use, open-ended questions to obtain the participants' reconstruction of their experience within the topic under study and to build upon their spontaneity of verbal responses to the questions asked. The range of questions adaptable to this interviewing approach is partitioned to participants' lived experiences and contexts of their silence in online learning. These questions include: (1) While attending your synchronous classes in graduate school, do you have experiences of being silent? (2) If you do, what are your experiences of being silent? How does it feel? Is it fulfilling? Do you feel uncomfortable? (3) What does your silence mean? (4) If you are not at ease with being silent, what is your way of coping? (5) How does this coping mechanism affect your experience of silence? These questions were also framed according to an objective thought from the researchers disclosing their foreknowledge that defines the limits of the phenomenon being investigated, as in epoché (see personal bracketing in this study). The questions for the interview were validated by fellow researchers, experts in the field of qualitative research, and the school's Research Ethics Committee. Trustworthiness was also observed by the researchers to ensure the validity of the questions for the conduct of the interview.

Ethical Considerations

Before the conduct of the study, the researchers sought approval from the school's Research Ethics Committee (REC) to verify if the study merits the fundamental ethical principles of research. Ethical considerations verified were on the safety of the participants, protection of their privacy, and confidentiality of data, transparency and informed consent of voluntary participation, researchers' qualifications

and skills, and social value. After the approval of REC, an in-depth semi-structured interview was purposively scheduled from November to December 2021 to collect responses from the participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

The in-depth semi-structured phenomenological interview conducted in this study followed the protocol or guide used by (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009 in Creswell 2013). The interview was conducted via Google Meet. Before the interview, participants were assured that their participation is voluntary and can waive their participation at anytime. The participants consented to the recording of the interview for documentation, transcription, and analysis purposes. Each interview lasted forty-five minutes to one hour. To protect the data of the participants, all electronic data files were deleted after researchers obtained the necessary findings.

Analysis of the responses was done using Creswell's (2007) simplified version of Moustakas's (1994) Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen process which involves: description of experiences with the phenomenon, bracketing, listing of significant statements, coding and clustering of significant statements to form themes, producing textural descriptions of experience, building of structural descriptions, and combining description of essences.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the transparency of this research study, trustworthiness (Polit & Beck, 2014) such as: dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability was observed. For dependability, the researchers asked an intercoder to crosscheck the coded data. They also sought the help of an auditor who is an expert in the research method to audit the phenomenological process. For credibility, the researchers

assured the participants that the interview is solely conducted for research purposes. They were given a copy of the paper upon the completion of the study. For confirmability, the researchers ensured that participants' experiences of silence were covered and achieved. Hence, coded data identifying their experience, their meanings, and the essence were returned to them for verification. For transferability, the researchers saw to it that detailed descriptions of the participants' lived experiences of silence are captured.

Personal Bracketing

Two of the researchers are graduate school faculty of College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) in one of the colleges in Cagayan de Oro City, while one is a faculty of a university in Bukidnon. At the onset of the pandemic, the researchers began to transition from face-to-face classes to virtual teaching. Before the academic year started for such a transition, the researchers were exposed to training, conferences, and workshops on strategies in online teaching, learning management systems and educational technologies and applications organized by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and facilitated by their institutions. As they are teaching at the graduate school, they too experienced the silence of students during classes. They observed that some students do not open their cameras or unmute their audio despite being told to engage in the discussion. Furthermore, when students unmute audio, they are observed to be multitasking based on their background noises that are not related to the class. Students also used their unstable internet connectivity and power interruption as excuses. These situations make researchers feel unsure of the students' presence in class. The researchers recognized these experiences, a priori knowledge, and assumptions. However, all these were set aside and suspended to focus on the main analysis of the experiences of the participants rather than the research itself.

It should be noted that the participants of this study are working as teachers, social workers, and librarians. Researchers have no direct contact and no previous information about the participants as they have not been their students.

Findings of the Study

Four themes emerged in the findings. These are emotional exhaustion, academic preparedness, physical factors, and cognitive and affective factors. These themes are based on the cluster of sub-themes as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the extracted statements from the narratives of the participants, coded and clustered as subthemes. The subthemes and the implied meanings are considered significant in the formulation of the four main themes.

Table 1.

Graduate School Students' Experiences of Silence in Online Learning

Main Themes	Sub- themes	Significant Statements	General Description of the Theme
Emotional Exhaustion	Fear	*... I am silent because I am afraid that my professor will ask me questions and I don't know the answer... (P6, Transcript 6, Lines 258-260)*	Fear in committing mistakes, in the professor's questions, and possible embarrassment caused participants' silence.

	Anxiety	*I feel pressured, since most of my classmates were not working in city social welfare and in our class, there are two of us working in the city social welfare office. (P5, Transcript 5, Lines 203-206)*	Silence is because of the participants' experiences of anxiety from feelings of pressured, nervousness, shame to share ideas, and conscious/ inferior with their speaking skills.
	Worn-out	*I tend to not ask questions or add questions so that the class will finish early. I just want the class to end as I am already tired. (P2, Transcript 2, Lines 72-75)*	Silence is due to feelings of worn-out or cognitively and emotionally weary in attending online classes.
Academic preparedness	Readiness	*I have silent moments especially if I am not prepared for the recitation. (P3, Transcript 3, Line 103)*	Silence signifies students' unpreparedness and lack of comprehension with unfamiliar terms.
	Grasping for information	*I want to know and learn more about the course. (P6, Transcript 7, Lines 260-261)*	Silence means grasping for information in the online environment.
Physical Factors	Teaching and Scheduling	*... I am silent because of the instructor's teaching method. (P8, Transcript 8, Lines 357-358)*	Silence is due to the instructors' teaching method which plays an important role in the active engagement of students.

	Connectivity and Surrounding	*...sometimes there are problems with the internet connection. If there is an activity or the reporter is choppy, you have to do further research. (P2, Transcript 2, Lines 68-70)*	Silence is due to unstable internet connectivity.
	Multitasking	*I do multitasking being a mother with an infant at the beginning of COVID- 19 time, I multitask. While breastfeeding, I also join the class. (P4, Transcript 4, Lines 149-150)*	Participants have varied reasons for multitasking.
Cognitive and Affective Factors	Information overload	*... I am overwhelmed especially if the topics are interesting or difficult to understand and that I also need space and time to understand everything especially that in one session, a lot are discussed. (P2, Transcript 2, Lines 37-39)*	Silence is due to information overload of not only disproportionate topics but also of engrossing topics.
	Detachment	*"I really get shy in the class especially when my classmates are fluent in English like when I had MAEL classmates." (P4, Transcript 4, lines 136-137)*	Detached feeling is dependent on the environment of the students which include their classmates.

Discussions

Data to identify the participants' experiences of silence were obtained from semi-structured interviews. Participants were given code names or pseudonyms (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, and P8) for confidentiality purposes.

Following the interpretative phenomenological analysis, four themes emerged: (1) emotional exhaustion;(2) academic preparedness; (3) physical factors; and (4) cognitive and affective factors.

Emotional Exhaustion (Fear, anxiety, and worn-out)

Silence, as an emotional exhaustion, refers to the participants' experiences of fear, anxiety, and worn-out.

Fear

Fear in online learning is a manifestation of the participants' fear of committing mistakes, of the professor's questions, and embarrassment. Participants shared that during synchronous online classes, silence means that they are afraid of sharing their ideas which might be incorrect. As shared by participants 1 and 5, "*My silence means that I am afraid that my question is not correct.."* (P1, Transcript 1, Lines 23-26) "*I am afraid because I might commit mistakes in sharing my answers...*" (P5, Transcript 5-6, Lines 227-231).

Additionally, participants 6 and 7 expressed that their silence meant that they were afraid and uncomfortable with their professors, specifically when they asked questions that they could not answer. "*In the class, I am silent because I am afraid my professor will ask me questions and I don't know the answer since I cannot relate to the course I am enrolled in...*" (P6, Transcript 6, Lines 258-260); "*I feel uncomfortable…. I feel that there is a need for me to participate because the*

teacher might think that I am not listening attentively in the discussion." (P7, Transcript 8, Lines 331-333) Further, P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6 also expressed that their discomfort is due to their classmates who have better experiences and can share and express good ideas in their classes. Although fear is a negative emotion compelled by graduate school students' experience in online learning, such emotion is still relevant, natural, and valid (Smidt et al., 2016).

Anxiety

Participants' experiences of anxiety stem from feelings of being pressured, nervous, ashamed to share their ideas, conscious and inferior in their English-speaking skills. Samaha (2021) deduced that anxiety in online learning is due to stress. Undeniably, this pandemic gives stress to all people be it at home, school, or at work just like the participants' experience of anxiety. Participants reported that they are silent because they are likely to feel inferior and withdrawn in the presence of others, especially the cognizable and competitive. Also, being silent means that they have nothing to share in the discussion. Below are participants' responses:

> *"I feel pressured, since most of my classmates were not working in city social welfare and in our class, there are two of us working in the city social welfare office."* (P5, Transcript 5, Lines 203-206)

> "*I feel nervous because I don't have any idea…*" (P6, Lines 265-266)

> "*...I really get shy in the class especially when my classmates are fluent in English...*" (P4, Transcript 4, Lines 175-183)

> Wang and Zhang (2021) opined that these feelings of tension, uneasiness, and worrisome are considered as internet

learning anxiety deemed as emotional responses of learners in a networked environment. They reckoned that online learning lacks external drive, which necessitates internal motivation. Lack of internal motivation frequently leads to an increased psychological discomfort like stress and anxiety.

Worn-out

Worn-out is the experience of being cognitively and emotionally weary in attending classes online. This situation makes participants passive.

P1 mentioned that she is very shy to ask questions and finds it tiring because of too much information discussed and shared in the class "*...I am very shy to ask questions…I find it hard and tiring to directly understand..."* (P1, Transcript 1, Lines 23-26).

Moreover, participants 2 and 3 pointed out that their silence mean that they are heavily exhausted as they are also working. Because of this, there are times that they are not able to catch the discussions and become passive to the lectures.

> *"...I tend to not ask questions or add questions so that the class will finish early… I just want the class to end…* (P2, Transcript 2, Lines 72-75).

> *"I lack preparation for the class discussion. I work 6 days a week and also have a baby. There are times that I only listen but do not really understand what was said by the professor."* (P3, Transcript 3, Lines 118-120)

These overwhelming exhaustions are aggravated by the disruptions brought by the pandemic which are subsequent to students experiencing academic burden, lack of relaxation, and pressure (Mosleh et al., 2022).

Academic preparedness (Readiness and Grasping for information)

In academic preparedness, participants expressed that their silence means that they are not ready and having difficulty grasping information.

Readiness

Participants' silence in online learning signifies that they are not prepared, they lack comprehension of the topic and are not familiar with the terms discussed. Participants 3 and 4 narrated that they become silent when they are not prepared for their class. Since they are both working as teachers and attend class after work, their readiness to classes is jeopardized. Shakir (2021) mentioned that one of the barriers in online learning is the student's inability to manage their time and academic activities.

> "*I have silent moments especially if I am not prepared for the recitation.*" (P3, Transcript 3, Line 103).

P5 added that her silence means that there are unfamiliar terms discussed by the professors. She narrated that although she is working in the Social Welfare Department, there are still terms that are foreign to her.

> "*There are terms that are unfamiliar to us, even though I am currently working in City Social Welfare. That is why I am silent in the class.*" (P5, Transcript 5, Lines 215-218)

P5 statement is an indication that a gap in learning may be an instructor factor. Thus, instructors may provide formative assessment to address learning gaps. Lee (2022) mentioned that one element in successful online learning is instructor's feedback. She proposed that instructors provide formative feedback to foster student learning.

Grasping for Information

Grasping for information is an indication of the students' cognitive ability which refers to the conscious mental activities like thinking, reasoning, understanding, learning, and remembering (Verbert et al., 2014). In the context of P4, she described that being overwhelmed with information leads her to stay silent in class to absorb all information. P6, an Information Technology graduate, enrolled in the Social Work program which is completely different from her undergraduate program, requiring her to focus to catch up on the instructor's discussion. These narratives mean that silence signifies that participants are ingesting information, and acquiring knowledge about their course.

> "*Silence also for me is catching up and comprehending the lesson...*" (P6, Transcript 7, Line 287)

> "*Another reason why I am silent in the class is because I want to know and learn more about the course.*" (P6, Transcript 7, Lines 260-261)

Furthermore, silence in online learning is related to the learning styles of the students. Fleming and Baume (2006) categorized the learner's learning styles using the Visual, Aural, Read, and Kinesthetic (VARK) model. Two of the participants belonged to the read/write learners, wherein learners can learn best when they can use written textual learning materials like handouts and lecture notes.

> "*But most of the time, I listen to the lecture of my instructor and take notes.*" (P6, Transcript 5, Lines 262-263)

Physical Factors (Teaching and Scheduling, connectivity and surrounding, and multitasking)

Physical factors such as the teacher's teaching method, class schedule, internet connection, surroundings and multi-tasking are factors of students' silence.

Teaching and Scheduling

Teaching method plays an important role in the active engagement of students. Online learning necessitates that teachers employ interactive teaching strategies. P8 mentioned. "*...I am silent because of the instructor's teaching method.*" (P8, Transcript 8, Lines 357-358). Cheta and Augustein (2015), Harasim (2012) and Zhang (2020) figured out that innovative teaching strategies like collaborative learning, flipped classroom learning and personalized learning are found to increase students' motivation, engagement and critical thinking.

P2 shared that he is enrolled in a night class after his day work. He consciously does not participate because he wanted the class to end early due to tiredness from the day's work. Kumari and Sethy (2021) encouraged teachers to be conscious of their time when holding classes. They recommended that the duration of the lecture should not be too long as it reduces students' interest in learning.

> "*…I tend to not ask questions or add questions so that the class will finish early.*" (P2, Transcript 2, Lines 72-74).

Connectivity and Surrounding

Five participants mentioned that their silence in online class is due to unstable internet connection. Participants 1 and 2 shared that their internet connection at home is unstable which results in their difficulty in understanding

the lessons. Below are their responses:

> "*When I do not open my cam, one reason is connectivity.*" (P1, Transcript 1, Lines 5-7)

> "*..sometimes there are problems with the internet connection. If there is an activity or the reporter is choppy, you have to do further research.*" (P2, Transcript 2, Lines 68-70. Participants 5, 7, and 3 also encountered the same problems.

A stable internet connection is a basic requirement in online learning (Subedi et al., 2020). Without this basic requirement, it is exhausting for the students to engage actively or attend their synchronous classes (Shakir, 2021).

Multitasking

Multitasking is when multiple actions are attempted simultaneously, either physical or cognitive (Osuh and Ishola, 2021). Participants have varied reasons why they do tasks simultaneously. One of the participants is a mother to an infant. While attending the online synchronous class, she is also nursing her baby. Another participant is attending online classes in her workplace. While P3 and P5 are searching for answers in order to catch up with the discussion. Hence, their silence means juggling with their roles as a student and as a mother or employee.

> "*I do multitasking being a mother with an infant at the beginning of COVID-19 time. While breastfeeding, I also join the class.*" (P4, Transcript 4, Lines 149-150)

> "*...I am in the office and I cannot listen carefully to the lecture because I am doing something.*" (P6, Transcript 6, Lines 261-262)

Cognitive and Affective Factors (Information overload and Detachment)

Cognitive and affective factors have also been identified as themes in the narratives of the participants. Cognitive is the area that incorporates mental exercises, and information overload can be categorized under this. Affective factors on the other hand, are identified with mentalities and qualities that highlight the outlook and emotional state of one (Wang, 2021). A feeling of detachment is an example of this and is identified to be experienced by the participants. Copeland et al., (2021) reported that the pandemic affected students' behavioral and emotional functioning, particularly attention and externalizing problems, or their affective and cognitive domains.

Information Overload

Information overload is generally described as a state of being overwhelmed with the excessive quantity of information (Misra & Stokols, 2012). Kashada et al. (2020) postulate that the exposure to too much information significantly undermines the process of undertaking effective and quality decision making. This explains why the MA and MS students resort to being silent during synchronous classes.

> "*...I am overwhelmed especially if the topics are interesting or difficult to understand..*" (P2, Transcript 2, Lines 37-39)

> "*I get amazed and shocked with the load of information.*" *(*P4, Transcript 4, Line 112)

When the information received is too much, or *outflowing* and *overwhelming (P2, line 28),* the processing of these becomes hard which resort to not being able to say anything. *Shocked* and *amazed* (P4, Transcript 4, line 112*)* with the overwhelming and outflowing ideas become an

automatic reaction, thereby, students have to find a *space (P2, line 38),* resulting in their silence.

This silence due to information overload is not only for arduous or disproportionate topics but also for engrossing topics. As stated by a participant "*....especially if the topics are interesting or difficult to understand (*P2, Transcript 2, and Line 38*)"*. Nonetheless, despite the silence, participants still make sure to listen and participate orally in the class.

> *"I listen to the lecture of my instructor and I take notes*" (P5, Transcript 6, line 205)

> *"Silence is thinking; thinking of the possible questions and answers. " (*P6, Transcript 7, Line 219)

This also holds true to participants 2, 4, 6. These statements mean that despite the difficulties encountered, they still do their part as students.

Detachment

Categorized under the affective factor is detachment which refers to the psychological condition of the inability of a person to fully engage with feelings of their own or of others (Legg, 2020).

When asked why they show instances of silence during their synchronous classes, three reasons were provided: classmates who seemed to know many things about the subject, teachers or professors who seemed intimidating, and difficulty in understanding the lesson.

> *"I really get shy in the class especially when my classmates are fluent in English like when I had MAEL classmates." (*P4, Transcript 4, lines 136-137)

> *"I am afraid and ashamed to share my answers to my classmate*s.*"* (P5, Transcript 6, Lines 178-179)

The previous statements show that the detached feeling is dependent on their environment which includes their classmates. When they are with a group, they are comfortable working with, silence does not occur. When with the opposite group, silence in the form of detachment happens.

This insecurity is not only because of the classmates, but sometimes because of the professors. In the in-depth interview, participants mentioned that when teachers show friendliness, they do not hesitate to participate in the class. When the teachers seem strict, this detaches them from the discussion and stays silent.

> *"Another factor I feel is the instructor. If I feel that the instructor is accommodating to questions, it urges me to ask questions. If the instructor is the opposite, I become hesitant to ask questions."* (P4, Transcript 4, Lines 124-126)

As read above, students display hesitancy in participating during classes for they fear their professors' negative reactions to their answers. Some of these fears stem from personal experiences with the professors and some arbitrary thoughts.

Last is the difficulty in understanding the topic. When topics are unfamiliar, students would rather just detach rather than talk.

> "*I also need space and time to understand everything especially that in one session, a lot is discussed.*" (P2, Transcript 2, Lines 48-49)

These statements proved that silence in the form of detachment is due to students' limited knowledge of

the topic. They keep silent and detach themselves from the class to process information or prevent from giving incorrect answers. Intimidating professors and classmates and limited knowledge of the topic have been found to cause the detachment of the participants. Mahyoob (2020) and Ullah et al. (2021) mentioned that e-learning at the outbreak of COVID-19 may be confronted by various challenges such as students' capability, teachers' motivation, and the environment.

Silence for the graduate school students means emotional exhaustion and lack of academic preparedness due to physical, cognitive, and affective factors in the online classes. Silence reflects their struggles in online learning. Therefore, the essence of silence is struggle. Silence in online learning without these struggles cannot become an experience of silence. This finding is in consonance to the findings identified by Donitsa-Schmidt and Ramot (2020); Khalil, (2020); Varea and González-Calvo, (2020) where they postulate that the migration to a new learning space has faced several major concerns during the pandemic time.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study inquired the lived experiences of graduate school students' experiences of silence in online learning during the time of the pandemic. On the basis of the findings drawn, it is inferred that their experiences of silence in online learning during COVID-19 are exhibitions of their challenges. This finding confirms and contributes to Mezirow's (1991, p.xii) assertion in transformational learning theory that states:

> "…*adult learners make meaning of their experiences, how social and other structures influence the way they construe that experience, and how the dynamics involved in modifying*

meanings undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional."

Through the transcendental phenomenological inquiry process, four themes emerged: *emotional exhaustion, academic preparedness, physical factors, cognitive and affective factors*. Hooked with the theory of connectivism the findings under study entail that graduate school students identified technology as a key element of their online learning which leads them to create their own learning opportunities and experiences amidst the presence of silence. To make meaning in the context of one's learning experiences, therefore, represents Mezirow's transformative learning theory. The participants may have different narratives of silence in online learning, but their range of self-learning and management skills are grappling with their transition of purposeful decisions from epistemologically unknown to ontologically known experiences.

Moreover, the findings of the study revealed a volume of graduate school students' unfavorable insights on the meaning of silence. An intervention on students' well-being may be proposed to foster a positive disposition in an online learning environment during the acute phase of the pandemic for a more transformative learning experience.

Some essential recommendations can be drawn from the study beyond theoretical inferences. For one, silence is indicative of students' struggles in online learning. Hence, this calls for the professors to be flexible, compassionate, and understanding in the online learning setup.

Since the conduct of this study was done virtually due to the restrictions brought by COVID-19 pandemic, certain limitations were recognized such as the participants, settings, and the approach used. The nature of phenomenological research does not generate findings that represent the entire population of graduate students as well as does not generate

theory or conceptual models to describe the phenomena of the study. The researchers recommend future researchers conduct a similar study in the context of face-to-face learning in the post-pandemic time so as to have a comparative study of the existing findings.

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