THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS: LEARNING FROM STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN PRESBYTERIAN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL, ABETIFI, GHANA

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Abstract:

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly altered how we interact with one another. The novel COVID-19 pandemic that peaked in 2020 led to protocols that reduced social contact and relationships. When schools closed, students had less time to talk to each other, hurting their friendships and ability to learn. This study examined the impact of COVID-19 on Abetifi Presbyterian SHS students' social connectedness just after the easing of the lockdown restrictions. The study adopted a qualitative research methodology with an interpretivist viewpoint encapsulated within the inductive epistemological framework. Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were employed to interview 40 students (SHS 1, 2, and 3). According to the findings of the study, COVID-19 made it more difficult for students to have social contact, making learning more difficult. The study further revealed that the closure of schools for several months limited students' close ties and social relationships. The study also indicated that

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peer connections and interactions had become weaker and more strained during the peak season of COVID-19. The findings have ramifications for managing COVID-19 and future pandemics and understanding social relationships amongst social actors. Educational governing authorities like the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service should maintain educational programmes that seek to rebuild social bonds damaged by pandemics.

Keywords: social connectedness, COVID-19 pandemic, social relationships, lockdown, social isolation

1. Introduction

It is only possible for a civilisation to endure if its members are sufficiently similar to one another (Benewaa, Agyiri & Asaah-Junior, 2022). To set itself apart from other social groups, the family possesses a special trait of unity and morality (Barua, Zaman, Omi & Faruque, 2020). Cassidy and Sharer (2016) think that humans developed into social species because of our intrinsic need to interact with and be linked to one another (Gilbert, 2020). As time has progressed, there have been outbreaks of infectious diseases all over the world that have put a significant number of lives in jeopardy and claimed the lives of many individuals (Benewaa et al., 2022). As a direct result of these epidemics, countries have closed their borders, enacted rigorous immigration restrictions, and barred individuals from entering territorial boundaries (WHO, 2020). Since the turn of this century, disease epidemics have posed a grave threat to the human race (WHO, 2020). For instance, in 2002, the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic infected 8,098 people, and killed 774 people (WHO, 2020). Similarly, 2013 came with the Ebola virus, which the World Health Organization dubbed "*the largest-ever outbreak of the Ebola virus disease,*" (Benewaa et al., 2022).

This pandemic infected 28,616 people and killed approximately 11,310 (WHO, 2016). On December 31, the first case of Covid-19 was identified, and the source of the epidemic has been attributed to a wet market in the city of Wuhan, which is located in the province of Hubei in China (WHO, 2020). Viral transmission from human to human and from patients to medical personnel has been proven (Benewaa et al., 2022). A significant number of the deaths that have been linked to this virus have been the result of pneumonia (WHO, 2022). After this, the World Health Organisation called the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) (WHO, 2020). Different geographic regions are seeing simultaneous outbreaks of the illness (Benewaa et al., 2022). Subsequently, On March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the global outbreak a pandemic (WHO, 2020). The first two cases of the coronavirus (Covid-19) were verified by Ghana's Ministry of Health on Thursday, March 13 (Ababio, 2020; BBC News, 2020). The individuals, according to the authorities, had come back to Ghana from Turkey and Norway. Like "*the once-in-a-century disease,*" this pandemic has spread over the world and caused a disaster (Gates, 2020).

Globally, as of 7:06pm CEST, 15 September 2022, there have been 607,745,726 confirmed cases of Covid-19, including 6,498,747 deaths (WHO – Covid-19 Situation Report, 2022). At the same time, a total of 12,613,484,608 vaccine doses have been administered (WHO – COVID-19 Situation Report, 2022). A regional-based analysis suggests that it has already infected 250,564,250 people in Europe with 2,085,938 fatalities, in the Americas, 177,120,143 people are infected with 2,827,177 deaths, and South-East Asia has already recorded 60,164,058 cases with 796,690 deaths (WHO – Covid-19 Situation Report, 2022). In Western Pacific, 87,542,610 are confirmed positive cases with 266,423 deaths; 23,038,476 cases have been recorded in Eastern Mediterranean with 348,093 deaths (WHO – Covid-19 Situation Report, 2022). The situation in Africa remains 9,315,425 cases with 266,423 deaths (WHO, 2022).

This deadly pandemic that has befallen the entire globe has witnessed the contributions of many heads of states, prime ministers, and presidents (Benewaa et al., 2022). A well-known saying that has garnered praise from people all around the world is the renowned quote by the President of the Republic of Ghana. His Excellency Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo, remarked: *"we have what it takes to bring our economy back to life after coronavirus, what we do not know how to do is to bring people back to life"* (Ababio, 2020). At a White House news conference, a reporter similarly probed former President Donald J. Trump on whether he believed the United States to be on a war footing in its fight against the virus. The president commented *"It's a war, I view the pandemic in its sense as a war, we must sacrifice together, because we are all in this together, and we will come through together. It's the invisible enemy. That's always the toughest enemy. But we are going to defeat the invisible enemy. I think we are going to do it even faster than we thought, and it will be a complete victory"* (Okyere, 2020) (BBC News, 2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a disease that is striking at the very foundation of societies (Ababio, 2020).

This predicament affects both people and society as a whole (Oberndofer et al., 2021). When schools closed, children and adolescents missed out on crucial opportunities for social and behavioural development, such as learning and human connection (UNESCO, 2020). During the height of COVID-19 restrictions, face-to-face interactions were often reduced to core network members, such as partners, family members or, potentially, live-in roommates; some 'weak' ties were lost, and interactions became more limited to those closest (Bambra et al., 2020; Long et al., 2022). Prior to the inception of the pandemic era, families had strong bonds and tighter social connectedness evidenced in their daily routines (Becker et al., 2019). Similarly, school children bonded so well with their peers enhancing their learning and social behaviour (Benewaa et al., 2022). Social connectedness depicts the active connections and relationships between individuals (Gouveia, Ramos & Wall, 2021; Long et al., 2022). Social connectedness is concerned with the associations between family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers, and other associates (Naser et al., 2020). The quality of social relationships is impacted by positive aspects such as emotional support from others, and negative aspects such as conflict and stress (Naser, Al-Hadithi, Dahmash, Alwafi, Alwan & Abdullah, 2020). Social

connectedness can be fostered through familiarity, feeling understood, and feeling accepted by close others (Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017).

Historically social connection has been one of the main ways humans have coped with largescale threatening events and disasters (Connidis & Barnett, 2018; Gilbert, 2020; Benewaa et al., 2022; Long et al., 2022). In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, lockdowns deprived people from one of the most powerful physiological and psychological regulators of threat–access to supportive social relationships (Long et al., 2022; WHO, 2022). For example, individuals with a large number of newly established relationships (e.g, university students) may have struggled to transfer these relationships online, resulting in lost contacts and a heightened risk of social isolation (Hu & Qian, 2021). This is consistent with research suggesting that young adults were the most likely to report a worsening of relationships during COVID-19, whereas older adults were the least likely to report a change (Fancourt et al., 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has robbed society of its relational benefits thereby resulting in a huge relational cost (Benewaa et al., 2022). These relational costs include; loss of intimate touch, loss of warmth and comfort (dyads), restricted access to support (social networks), and loss of cohesion and identity (community networks and bonding) (Long et al., 2022).

To further exacerbate matters, places of public assembly were closed and shut down temporary (Benewaa et al., 2022). The stringent social distancing measures that were implemented in Ghana in late March 2020 remained in many sectors, particularly in education, social gatherings, sports clubs, and others. While such measures are intended to protect people from the infection, a key and unintended consequence of such instructions could be an increase in stress, loss of close friends, loneliness, and domestic violence among the whole population (Algunmeeyn et al., 2020; Piquero et al., 2020). Social relationships and connections enable individuals to regulate their emotions, cope with stress, and remain resilient during stressful situations (Benewaa et al., 2022). Conversely, loneliness and social isolation aggravate stress and often result in negative effects on mental, cardiovascular, and immune health (Long et al., 2022; Naser et al., 2020). In fact, in Ghana, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed many inadequacies, inconsistencies, and deliberate inequities in our education setup (Benewaa et al., 2022). This ranged from our unpreparedness to invest in our education sector ranging from access to internet connectivity, provision of computers (laptops and tablets), and supportive environment needed to focus on learning (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

The lockdown in the country disrupted conventional schooling that lasted for several weeks (UNESCO, 2020). From the perspective of students, they had to resort to their own efforts to maintain learning remotely through the internet, radio, and television (UNESCO, 2020; Long et al., 2022). Students from marginalised homes were at risk of falling behind, thus, they lacked the resilience and wherewithal to engage in their own learning as well as lacking access to digital learning resources (OECD, 2021; Al-Samarrai, Gangwar & Gala, 2020; MEXT, 2020). Perhaps most importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the social fibre of students including networking and social opportunities

(MEXT, 2020). Within the social connectedness tents, children are considered dynamic social actors and reliable sources of information about their own lives.

It has become common knowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the interaction between individuals with no exception of students. The pandemic has really plagued the social relatedness of school children. From literature, a plethora of studies have been done to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on education, academic performance, mental health, and other relevant constructs. What seems to be missing in the literature, particularly in the Ghanaian jurisdiction is how Covid-19 has affected the social connectedness of students. This constitutes an empirical and practical knowledge gap. The aim of this article is to contribute to knowledge in literature and fill in some of the gaps in the literature about social connectedness and Covid-19. It then behooves this current study to adequately investigate the impact of this novel COVID-19 pandemic on the social connectedness of students in senior high schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and Social Connectedness

The existence of societies is based on the notion that the majority of families are sustained by the principles of the quality of life of important persons in their immediate environment, as indicated in the degree to which they are socially linked (Golics, Basra, Finlay & Salek, 2013). Gatherings such as weddings, church meetings, burial rituals, and other associated community events are the primary vehicles through which social contact takes place in the overwhelming majority of communities (Calnan, Gadsby, Konde, Diallo & Rossman, 2018). When these activities are abandoned or diminished, societal cohesiveness, trust, and familial relationships suffer (Amara, Tommy & Kamara, 2017). In times like this (COVID-19 era), social connectedness is a powerful psychological and physiological regulator and this is emphasised without exaggeration (Gilbert, 2020). Social connectedness in addition to providing significant coping strategies (i.e., social support) can also help protect against the harmful effects of adversity and even promote psychological growth (Petrocchi & Cheli, 2019; Layous & Nelson-Coffey, 2021; Slavich, Ross & Zaka, 2021).

From the literature, social connectedness is categorised into structural social relationships and functional social aspects (Valtorta et al., 2016). Structural social relationships depict the number and type of people with whom a person interacts (Valtorta et al., 2016; Long et al., 2022). The functional social aspects denote the qualitative experience of those interactions, such as the perception of social support and loneliness (Valtorta et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has altered how we interact and relate to one another. New standards for social etiquette are being set in real time as we hide our faces behind masks and move away when someone gets too close for social distancing comfort (Long et al., 2022). The recovery journey looked long with continued disruption to social relationships (Long et al., 2022). In the opinion of Mates et al. (2021), social connection has been an important pathway through which humans have coped with

seemingly threatening events such as what Covid-19 has presented to us. The convoy model has it that social connectedness plays a cardinal role amongst families in sustaining care, exchanging resources, companionship, emotional support, and a sense of security (Cannidis & Barnett, 2018).

Similarly, social connectedness and networks often take the form of face-to-face meetings and related activities augmented by virtual interactions through mobile phone and video conversations, text messaging, and visiting places of interest (Ignatow et al., 2013; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014; Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016; Hu & Qian, 2021). Markowska-Manista and Zakrzewska-Oledzka (2020) are of the considered opinion that the Covid-19 outbreak has caused substantial changes in the patterns of social connections and relatedness with the introduction of restrictions such as lockdowns, social distancing, avoidance of hand-shakes, wearing of face masks. This is adequately echoed by (Cannidis & Barnett, 2018) who posited that the lockdowns imposed by authorities exacerbated inequalities among children, within families, at school, and with close friends and acquaintances. In no particular order, the school that provided a social-ecological framework for students to interact and share their experiences with peers was equally disintegrated.

Thus, physical contacts were limited to close neighbours in households and lockdown impositions forced these students to confine their social connectedness within the domestic space (Gouveia et al., 2021). This is because, at the peak of the pandemic, moving out was allowed only for outings to buy essential goods and services and access public health (Gouveia et al., 2021; Trotter, 2021; Long et al., 2022). The effects of the pandemic on people's ability to engage socially are the subject of ongoing research (Santos & Novelli, 2017; Alcayna-Stevens, 2018; Lamoure & Julliard, 2020).

For instance, Santos and Novelli (2020) examined the impacts of the Ebola crisis on social connections in selected West African countries namely Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. Using an interpretivist epistemological framework, the study revealed that some families did not visit their sick children or return for them once they recovered, while other children whose caregivers had died from the virus were denied or rejected by their extended families. The study concluded that the Ebola crisis disrupted familial sociability evidenced in family connectedness. Thus, close family members were prevented from shaking hands and kept a physical distance to avoid catching the virus.

More so, the study found that students witnessed disruptions in social connections as they were apparently rejected by their peers for fear of contracting the Ebola virus. Matos et al. (2021) on the other hand adopted a positivist approach to examine the role of social connection on the experience of COVID-19-related post-traumatic growth and stress and reported that the perceived threat of COVID-19 predicted increased post-traumatic growth and traumatic stress. The study also found that social connection indexed as compassion and social safeness predicted higher post-traumatic growth and traumatic stress, whilst social disconnection indexed as fear of compassion and loneliness predicted increased traumatic symptoms only.

The study further revealed that social connectedness heightened the impact of the perceived threat of COVID-19 on post-traumatic growth, whereas social disconnection weakened this impact. The study concluded that social disconnection magnified the impact of the perceived threat of Covid-19 on traumatic stress. This finding supports the views shared by Vindegaard and Benros (2020). Vindegaard and Benros (2020) investigated the Covid-19 pandemic and mental health consequence and found greater anxiety and depression in the general public as a result of an interrupted social connectedness. This systematic review reported a high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms related to COVID-19 pandemic among healthcare workers and identified a lack of social connectivity as a potential predictor. This finding is consistent with the findings of Saltzman et al. (2018) and Xu and Qian (2021). In their separate investigations, they discovered that in times of major disasters such as hurricanes (i.e., Hurricane Katrina), floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, and mining disasters, the role of social connection and support was shown to be crucial to people's ability to cope, recover and prevent social anxiety and depression.

In the same vein, the effect of social connection is supported by the findings of Armstrong et al. (2020) and Kelly et al. (2021). Their respective findings suggested that feeling socially safe is positively linked to feeling socially connected to others, supported in close social relationships, and being resilient, and it is negatively linked to depression and anxiety. Similarly, Matos et al. (2015) sought to find out the importance of warmth and safeness memories and feelings on the association between shame memories and depression. The study posited that social safeness is associated with the decreased traumatic impact of early adverse events and mediates the link between early emotional trauma and depressive symptoms.

In the submission of Armstrong et al. (2020), they affirmed that feelings of social safeness so to speak, may be an emotional regulator process in its own right that can be distinguished from positive effects and negative effects which to these distinguished researchers are a unique predictor of stress. They humbly concluded that firstly, social connectedness act as a buffer against mental health problems, and secondly, being socially safe is connected to being open and receptive to support and compassion from others (Kelly & Dupasquier, 2016; Seppala et al., 2017).

A study conducted by Rohwerder (2020) on the secondary impacts of major disease outbreaks averred that infectious disease outbreaks can have a negative connotation on social connectedness and cohesion with reasons being fear of contagion, breakdown of the family trust, and changes in behaviour that erode the social fabric of families and communities. In the qualitative study by Benewaa et al. (2022) to assess the impact of COVID-19 on social interaction in families, they concluded that the emergence of the novel pandemic has a dire lasting consequence on family social interaction. The study concluded that in times of a pandemic, human association and family ties are disrupted.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Social Connectedness Theory

A search through the literature revealed that social connectedness theory has the variables that best examined the impact of COVID-19 on social connectedness hence forming the theoretical underpinning of this study. Social connectedness is a stable individual difference that reflects the awareness and internalised experience of interpersonal closeness in relationships with family, friends, strangers, community, and society (Lee & Robbins, 2000). Social connectedness can be conceptualised as the way an individual views himself or herself to the social world, as emotionally connected or disconnected. Lee and Robbins describe connectedness as the ability to feel comfortable within a social context larger than family, neighbours, or friends.

According to Lee and Robbins (1995; 2000), connectedness is a piece of the larger construct of belongingness. It begins in infancy and continues to develop throughout life. The initial stage, companionship, occurs when the infant bonds with a nurturing parent. This later extends to being close to others or objects such as toys. The next stage, affiliation, emerges in response to the demands of adolescence in which the sense of self must extend beyond the primary caregiver to similar peers. The final and most advanced stage, connectedness, characterises an individual as comfortable in social roles and responsibilities and able to identify with others perceived as different. Problems arise when needs are not met somewhere in the developmental progression of connectedness.

An individual whose companionship needs are not fulfilled develops a fragile sense of self, low self-esteem, and isolation to avoid rejection. People whose affiliation needs are not met may be able to maintain relationships with single close others but have difficulty maintaining a sense of self in larger groups of friends or family without the reassuring presence of the close other. Finally, if connectedness needs are not met, individuals experience feelings of being different or distant from others and frustration with the sense that others do not understand them. In addition, individuals may isolate or develop fantasies about finding a place to belong and reject more realistic social roles.

As the world anticipates normalcy, people have experienced connectedness fragility leading to a breakdown of social bonds and ties. The Covid-19 pandemic has kept people from close affiliates and other important social actors. People no more relate to one another more closely as a result of ensuring physical and social distancing. Some have suffered companionship issues emanating from unmet connectedness. These and many other factors have quickened the researchers to situate this study within the framework of social connectedness theory as expounded by Lee and Robbins (2000). The review of this theory is beneficial to the current study in the sense that the need to belong is one of the most basic needs of people and is present among people at different levels and forms. Connectedness gives people a sense of belonging and facilitates access to opportunities, services, and resources. When this mutual bond is available, it creates a secure atmosphere and a feeling safe thereby enhancing the level of social interaction in and outside the family. It is of these interests that the social connectedness theory cannot be relegated to the background in this article.

3. Methods and Materials

3.1 Research Paradigm and Design

This study employed a qualitative research paradigm utilizing the interpretivist stance captured within the inductive epistemological framework. This paradigm makes an effort to 'get into the head of the subjects being studied' so to speak, and to understand and interpret what the subject is thinking or the meaning he or she is making of the context (Berg, 2004; Cohen et al., 2018; Yin, 2018; Kuranchie, 2021). In terms of the appropriate design, the researchers adopted a descriptive case study, specifically the single case.

A case study is an in-depth or intensive description and analysis of a single unit or bounded system (Yin, 2018). According to Kuranchie (2021), a case study is an in-depth study of one or more instances of a phenomenon in a real-life context, which reflects the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon. Thus, it seeks to understand the case in detail and in its natural setting recongnising its complexities and context. In the considered opinion of Cohen et al. (2018), a case study has a holistic focus, aiming to preserve and understand the wholeness and unity of the case. In a nutshell, a case study permits the use of different sources of data, different types of data, and different research methods. This helped the researchers to capture various nuances, patterns, and more latent elements that other research approaches might overlook (Kuranchie, 2021). Nevertheless, the weakness of a case study is that its conclusions are not subject to generalization but are strictly limited to the subject of study (Cohen et al., 2018; Yin, 2018; Kuranchie, 2021).

3.2 Population, Sample, and Sampling Techniques

In this current study, the target population comprised all students (SHS1, SHS2, and SHS3) in Abetifi Presbyterian Senior High School in the Kwahu East District in the Eastern Region of Ghana. According to Pope, Ziebland, and Mays (2020), there are no rules in qualitative research for deciding sample size; therefore, the issue of sample size is not an important aspect of qualitative inquiry. The sample size is influenced by the broad nature and duration of the study as well as the participants' ability to provide detailed information on the phenomenon under study (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018).

According to Yin (2018), since a case study approach does not rely on the type of representative sampling logic used in survey research, "*the typical criteria regarding sample size is irrelevant*" (p. 50). Instead, the sample size is determined by the number of cases required to reach saturation, that is, data collection until no significant new findings are revealed (Matthews & Ross, 2010; Cohen et al., 2018; Kuranchie, 2021). For Lincoln and Guba (1985), sample size determination for a qualitative study should be dictated by informational redundancy. Britten (1998) has it that in any qualitative study sampling 50 – 60 participants are sufficient. In the case of Sobal (2001), researchers can select 45 participants for qualitative studies. That is not far from what Green and Thorogood (2004)

posited. For these scholars, sampling 20 participants is appropriate for information-rich studies. Consequently, Hagaman and Wutich (2017) called for 20 – 40 participants for studies using the qualitative paradigm. In line with this is the recommendation by Hennink et al. (2017) involving sample representation. Hennink et al (2017) recommended 16 – 24 participants. That said, the sample size for the study was 40 students of Abetifi Presbyterian Senior High School. A multi-stage sampling technique was used in selecting participants i.e., purposive and convenience for this study. A multi-stage sampling refers to the combination of two or more sampling methods used to select the participants (Cohen et al., 2018; Kuranchie, 2021). This sampling method was used because of the following reasons: firstly, it allowed for a combination of more sampling techniques in stages when conducting a study, and secondly, it is appropriate when drawing samples from a widely dispersed population (Yin, 2018).

The purposive (homogeneous) sampling technique was used to select three departments (Social Science, Business, and Home Science) at Abetifi Presbyterian Senior High School. Purposive sampling helped make judgments about selecting the departments with typical and peculiar characteristics (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016; Cohen et al., 2018). Purposive (homogeneous) sampling is used in situations in which an expert uses judgment in selecting cases with a specific purpose in mind (Kuranchie, 2021). In purposive (homogeneous) sampling, research participants or respondents are selected for their participation in the study based on specific characteristics that the researcher believes will bring to bear in collecting the necessary data. (Cohen et al., 2018; Kuranchie, 2018).

In addition, this method does not specify the required number of subjects or participants. (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). Lastly, the convenience sampling technique was adopted to select the participants for the study. In convenience sampling, the data is taken from participants who are accessible, available at a given time, and willing to participate in the study (Etikan, Musa & Morrison, 2016). This sampling technique enabled the researcherd to talk to students who were available and ready to be talked to.

3.3 Research Instrument and Rigour

The researchers employed an interview guide to gathering relevant data for the study. The questions in the qualitative instrument were open-ended, which meant that participants were allowed to freely express themselves, their thoughts, and their reactions to the questions in their own words (Cohen et al., 2018; Kuranchie, 2021). The key informant interview involved a one-on-one conversation between the interviewers and students. The students (participants) had the most accurate knowledge and information about the subject matter under investigation.

The participants played a key role because they provided invaluable information reflecting personal opinions and larger social patterns. The interpretative narrative review framework aims to achieve trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Kuranchie, 2021). Credibility is assured through

accurate representation of the original terminology of publications in categories and themes (Kuranchie, 2021). Transferability is ensured through the identification of literature gaps, while dependability is safeguarded through the consistent repetition of categories during data analysis (Kuranchie, 2021). Finally, confirmability is provided through the identification of the original publications (in the referencing section of this article) and the available data analysis. The researchers conducted data collection and analysis, as the researchers understand narrative reviews as acts of reflexivity through which identification of themes and interpretation of findings are affected by the researchers' reflexivity which is the outcome of their training, practice experience, and personality. With the aim of counteracting the inability of the researchers to be "objective," mainly due to countertransference (Cohen et al. 2018), The researchers adopted reflexivity to promote a continual internal dialogue that involves critical self-evaluation of the researchers' positionality (Berger, 2015) towards the data and their interpretation.

3.4 Data Processing and Analysis

This study adopted a qualitative approach utilising content and thematic analysis. After the interview with participants, the researchers transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. Each interview was labelled pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. All aspects of the data collected including the field notes and the interviews were analysed using the thematic content analysis approach (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). A qualitative content analysis approach to data analysis involves reading and re-reading transcripts looking for similarities and differences that enable the researchers to develop themes and categories. Ways to make the text include coding paragraphs or other units of analysis, highlighting units of analysis, different coloured ink, arranging the data into themes, cutting up transcripts and putting them in thematic folders, using a card index system, noting lines of numbers for easier cross-referencing (Jones, 2002).

Pope, Ziebland, and Mays (2000) also provided strategies for analyzing data, using the framework approach, which includes becoming familiar with the raw data by immersing oneself in it; developing a thematic framework in which one has identified all the key issues, and concepts and themes, indexing all the data in texted form by coding transcripts or short text descriptors; charting the data using summaries of experiences; mapping and interpretation of data using charts to define concepts, and mapping the range and nature of the phenomena, creating typologies and finding an association between themes to find explanations and develop findings. Additional means of data analysis suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) include triangulating, using at least three different pieces of data from a different point of view. Triangulating may be viewed in terms of using a variety of both data collection methods and sources. They also suggest constantly comparing earlier data with later data as they are collected, using different bases for comparison and categorization and sorting data, and using visual displays to

enable the researcher to look at the ways the data develop into categories. One might look at how the codes develop categories.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are of great concern in the research process where living organisms are involved. This concerns the quest for knowledge relative to the rights of participants of the research or society at large (Neuman, 2007). It is about what is right and wrong in research, what is legitimate and what is illegitimate. The ethical principles aim at informing the researcher, about the potential risk associated with participants involved in research, and the need for their protection (Marczyk, DeMatteo, & Festinger, 2005). This study recognised the need to adhere to ethical principles in the entire research process.

Research participants were given the choice to decide whether to partake in the research process. Participants who consent to take part in this study were made aware of their decision to withdraw from the research at any point in the process. Participants were asked to read and sign a consent form. The aims, methods, and benefits of the study were explained to the research participants. Participant's confidentiality was ensured consistently by using a pseudo name instead of the participant's real name. Confidentiality was maintained by the provision of privacy during the interview and by keeping data emanating from the interview accessible to only the researchers. The transcribed data was kept under lock and key.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Demographic Variables

The first demographic variable of interest to the researchers was the gender of the participants. Table 1 presents the details of participants according to their gender.

Table 1: Distribution of participants by gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	15	37.50
Female	25	62.50
Total	40	100.00

Source: Field survey (2022).

Table 1 presents the number of participants as used in the study. Out of a total of 40 participants, 15(37.5%) were males whilst 25(62.5%) were females. This suggests that the majority of the participants were females.

The second demographic variable worth investing in was the age of the participants. The result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of participants by age

Age	Frequency	Percentage
13 – 15 years	18	45.00
16 – 18 years	22	55.00
Total	40	100.00

Source: Field survey (2022).

From Table 2, 18 participants out of a total of 40 were aged 13 – 15 years. This represented 45.00%. Consequently, 22 participants representing 55.00% were aged 16 – 18 years. This obviously constituted the majority of the participants for this study.

4.2 How did you adhere to the safety protocols?

The participants were asked how they adhered to the precautionary measures against the Coronavirus. From the data, the following details appear to run through. Almost all the participants interviewed observed the following safety protocols, i.e., washing hands under running water, using hand sanitizers, wearing a nose mask, and physical distancing. For example, one participant with the pseudo-name (Pato) asserted that he washed his hands under running water every 30 minutes to prevent him from contracting the deadly virus.

> *"Honestly, I was very scared of contracting the covid virus, so I washed my hands under running water every 30 minutes. To some of my family members, they were shocked how serious I took the preventive measures. I remember telling them that, I can afford to die and leave my dear family behind. So, in fact I was very serious. If there is an award, I think should be the one receiving, Haha Haha (He laughed passionately)."*

Another student participant with name Quincy also had this to say:

> *"For me, this Corona virus was very serious so I took the safety measures like writing examination, just like writing core mathematics or integrated science. I washed my hands very well with soap and under running water, used hand sanitizers frequently, and did not want to shake hands or hug people not even my family members. I did not joke with wearing my nose mask. I did this with the hope of keeping myself and family safe.*

A 17-year-old Akosua who was interviewed also noted the following:

> *"For me, I was following the normal routine, washing of hands, using hand sanitizers. I am even wondering if hand sanitizers can kill the virus as claimed by the Ghana Health Service and World Health Organisation. I was told by a medical practitioner that viruses are microscopic organisms you cannot see with the naked eyes or kill them with just hand*

washing or by using hand sanitizers. That notwithstanding, I still have to respect the safety protocols to keep myself safe.

In the view of Agengo (Pseudonym), an 18-year-old second year student, the government gave various directions and was seriously observing them.

"In the first place, the government was very proactive in sanctioning appropriate measures to curtail further spread. Together with the Ghana Health Service, World Health Organisation, European Union, Bill and Melinda Gate Foundation, the government enacted five guidelines, and I observed these guidelines accordingly. Thus, I kept physical (social) distance at public places by putting on my nose mask as often as I could, though felt uncomfortable sometimes. I sanitized my hands frequently when I came close to people. I avoided hand-shakes most often, but this one was not easy at all (can read from facial gestures).

The findings from the participants are in line with studies by Long et al. (2022), Rohwerder (2020), and Benewaa et al. (2022). In their separate studies, they came up with the following conclusions. Firstly, the Covid-19 outbreak has caused substantial changes in the patterns of social connections and relatedness with the introduction of restrictions such as lockdowns, social distancing, avoidance of hand-shakes, wearing of face masks, and among others. A crisis such as the Coronavirus has disrupted familial sociability. That is, close family members were prevented from shaking hands and kept a physical distance to avoid catching the virus. In this Covid-19 era, new standards for social etiquette are being set in real-time as we hide our faces behind masks and move away when someone gets too close for social distancing comfort.

4.3 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social connectedness

It was revealed that the majority of the participants reported that the Covid outbreak affected their social connections with family, friends, and significant others. Some of the participants also reported that they had developed negative attitudes toward social relationships and communication with others. Others also asserted that they missed the culture of bonding with peers in school which had contributed to severe isolation. The majority of the participants also opined that the lockdown restrictions forced family members to live closer together, whilst friends, schoolmates, classmates, and extended family members were kept apart. This is adequately supported by evidences from the interview data.

SamPee (Pseudo name) noted that:

"My stay at home has taught me many lessons, thus, how we should keep on tight with our social relationships. At home, I always see the old faces as in my father, mother and two buddies (siblings). But at school there were lots of friends you can have access to and play with. Even, when we resumed, everyone was cautious not to catch the virus

but quite better than when I was home. Now I can hang out with classmates though hiding behind a mask but we can talk and exchange ideas."

A third-year student, with the pseudo-name (Brown), shared his opinion.

"For me I started feeling lonely when the news came in that schools should close down. What exacerbated my fear was that I did not know for sure when we were coming back. Not that I will have no one to talk to when I get home, but for sure I have come to have good social relations with my peers. I feel very comfortable around them and you know what, friends will make you laugh when you did want to. This covid thing has shaped my personal relationships with friends all in the name of many fears. My long period of stay in the house was tragic. I needed to see my classmates, schoolmates, seniors, juniors, teachers badly. But now we are in school so I hope we get back on the way we related with friends."

In similar contexts, most participants also expressed how disgruntled they felt with the long stay at home. As if that was enough, they also expressed that they experienced boredom and prolonged loneliness.

Sister Sandy: *"Hmmm…(pitiful expression), I have not recovered from the prolonged loneliness I experienced in the house, over six months of continuous stay in the house was very terrible. Before the covid, I was a member of the cadet corps and other social groupings. These groups really shaped my association with friends and how I behaved. When faced with difficulties, I easily counted on my peers for some advice. But in the house, you know you can't discuss any trivial issues with mom and dad. I was robbed off the social feelings I had with colleagues before the lockdown. Though as I speak, we back to school but interactions haven't normalized but hope things will start to turn around"* **[A 17-year-old second year student]**.

Shatta: *"Never again should such a terrific tragedy befall the world. Oh God! I don't even know where to start from. Learning became very tough, no one to explain things to you. I had no cellphone so couldn't reach out to friends for many months. At a point I thought the world will come to the end. My fears escalated when I watched television and scenes on covid were shown. I was praying things normalized so I come to school because I am seriously tired of staying indoors. I felt sorry for myself and was very depressed. There is little hope once again. Now I find myself in school, thank God none of my friends died so at least we can start from where we ended."* **[A first-year student]**

Eve: *"I am really traumatized and will take a longer time to recover. I think coming back to school is great. For once in several months, I have many friends to move with, going to field to train as a member of the basketball team. This covid scattered my friends and we*

could not have any form of engagements. I have missed school so much, but all in all I am
back. I am happy.

From the narratives so far, it has been established that Covid-19 affected students' social connectedness negatively. The long stay off from school heightened the lost contacts that were previously enjoyed by these students at school. These findings are consistent with findings in the literature. For instance, in the submission of Armstrong et al. (2020), is affirmed that feelings of social safeness so to speak, may be an emotional regulator process in its own right that can be distinguished from positive effects and negative effects which are unique predictors of stress. They humbly concluded that firstly, social connectedness acts as a buffer against mental health problems, and secondly, being socially safe is connected to being open and receptive to support and compassion from others.

This finding is consistent with the findings of Saltzman et al. (2018) and Xu and Qian (2021). In their separate surveys, they discovered that in times of major disasters such as hurricanes (i.e., Hurricane Katrina), floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, and mining disasters, the role of social connection and support was shown to be crucial to people's ability to cope, recover and prevent social anxiety and depression. So did the findings of Matos et al. (2021). Matos et al. (2021) adopted a positivist paradigm using a quantitative approach to examine the role of social connection on the experience of Covid-19 related post-traumatic growth and stress and reported that the perceived threat of Covid-19 predicted increased post-traumatic growth and traumatic stress.

The study concluded that social disconnection magnified the impact of the perceived threat of Covid-19 on traumatic stress. This is consistent with the findings by Santos and Novelli (2020). Santos and Novelli (2020) examined the impacts of the Ebola crisis on social connections in selected West African countries namely Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. Using a qualitative research approach, the study revealed that some families did not visit their sick children or return for them once they recovered, while other children whose caregivers had died from the virus were denied or rejected by their extended families. The study concluded that the Ebola crisis disrupted familial sociability evidenced in family connectedness. From the forgoing arguments and a plethora of evidence in the literature, it will not be out of place for the researchers to affirm that the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted senior high school students' social connectedness, especially in Abetifi in the Kwahu East District.

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic is hurting social relationships, which could have long-term health effects. It has brought about a change in the manner in that students behave in their various schools. Notwithstanding, students admitted that returning to school was very significant because they students needed in-person learning and social interaction for their overall development i.e., their social and emotional well-being. Decision-makers

should implement educational initiatives aimed at enhancing the social health of the students and teaching them about modern alternative communication channels. This is expected to lead to better social relationships and communication across the whole population, enabling students to cope better with the pandemic and maintain societal well-being and productivity.

6. Recommendations

In order to mitigate COVID-19's effects on schools, governments and NGOs must immediately pool their resources and expertise.

Among others, the following are recommended particularly for school authorities:

1) School authorities should expose students to reliable information on how to keep themselves and others safe.
2) School authorities should be confident and enthusiastic about students returning to school. This sends a positive message to students that they will cope and have an exciting atmosphere as they get back into the school routine.
3) Teachers should talk and listen to students' feelings about returning to school, and let students know that their feelings are catered for. This will ensure maximum cooperation and team spirit.
4) Teachers and relevant authorities should let students understand that it is normal to feel nervous or uncertain about returning to school, but teachers should reassure students that they will get through it.
5) School authorities should encourage students to have peer interactions frequently and this could be done through peer teaching and games. Whilst adopting these social connection measures, the precautionary (safety) protocols should be respected.

Conflict of Interest Statement
There are no conflicts of interest on the part of the authors.

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