

IMPACT OF COVID- 19 ON DENTAL SCHOOL CLUB ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID- 19 pandemic students could not have their usual social interactions with others in the school in order to prevent the aerosol spread of the disease. The study was performed to determine the impact of COVID- 19 on dental school club involvement and activities. Students had to brainstorm to develop online interactions in order to engage their colleagues in different club activities. Our aim is to determine the students' perception of online club activities vs in person club activities.

KEYWORDS

Dental Education, Extracurricular Activities, Clubs, COVID- 19

1. INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic of COVID- 19 impacted all aspects of life. Initial guidelines to prevent transmission of the virus involved shelter in place. This required many to work remotely if possible. Many normal school routines were disrupted. Attending dental school not only involves academic activities, but also involves networking with classmates for both academic and social interactions. This study evaluates the students' preferences of the virtual vs in person formats for dental school clubs.

2. METHODS

An eleven question survey was sent through Surveys (Qualtrics) to the first, second, third and fourth year students (D1, D2, D3 and D4) at New York University College of Dentistry (NYUCD). This voluntary, anonymous survey asked if they felt that online club activities were easier to attend, more interactive, and less exciting than in person club activities. Students were asked to choose which club activity they attended from a choice of either educational lecture, exercise, fitness, outreach activity or recreational. They were asked if they attended less online club events and if they felt disconnected when attending online. Students had the opportunity to make suggestions as to how to improve their experience in online club events and to write the type of activities they wanted to see in the future. A total of 146 students responded to the survey. Each class has a total of over 300 students.

3. RESULTS

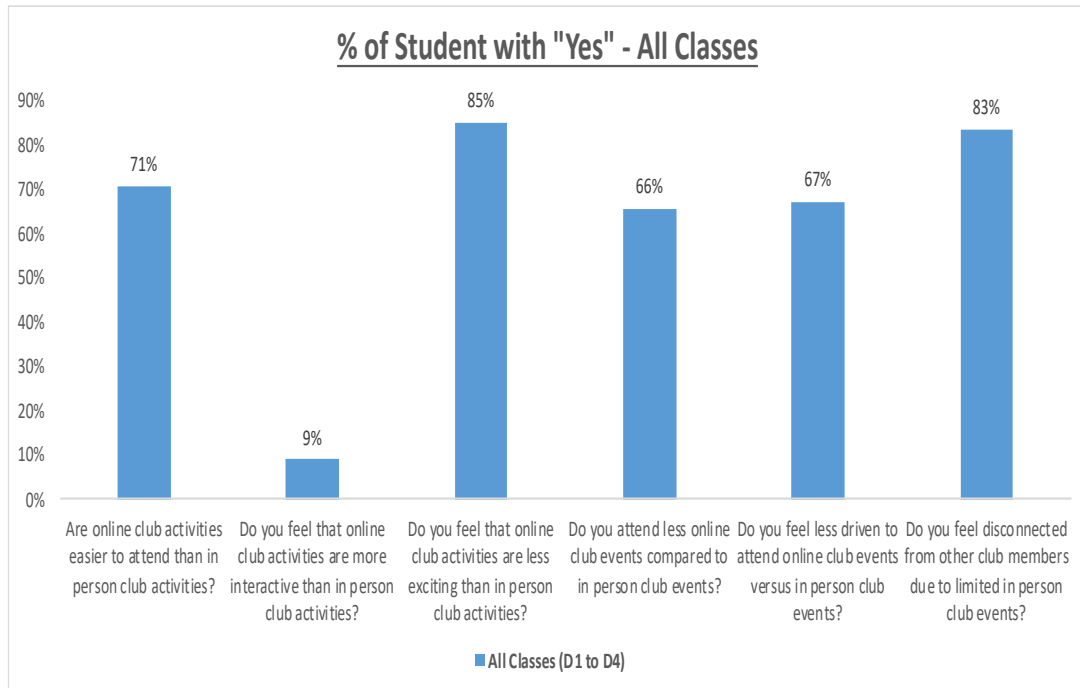


Figure 1: Although online club activities are easier to attend, many feel disconnected from other club members

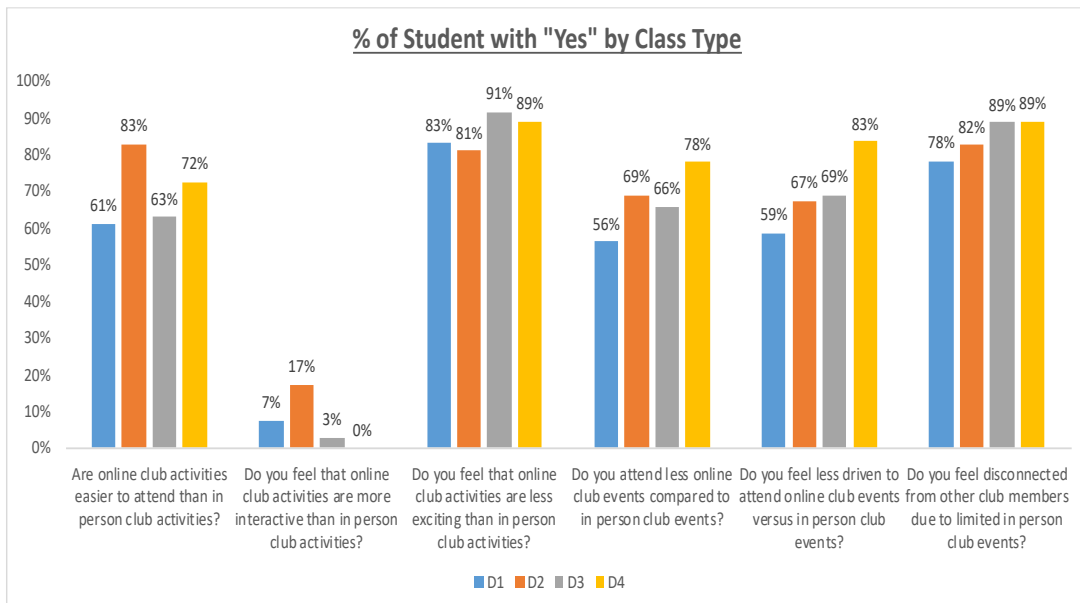


Figure 2: All classes felt that online club activities were less exciting than in person activities

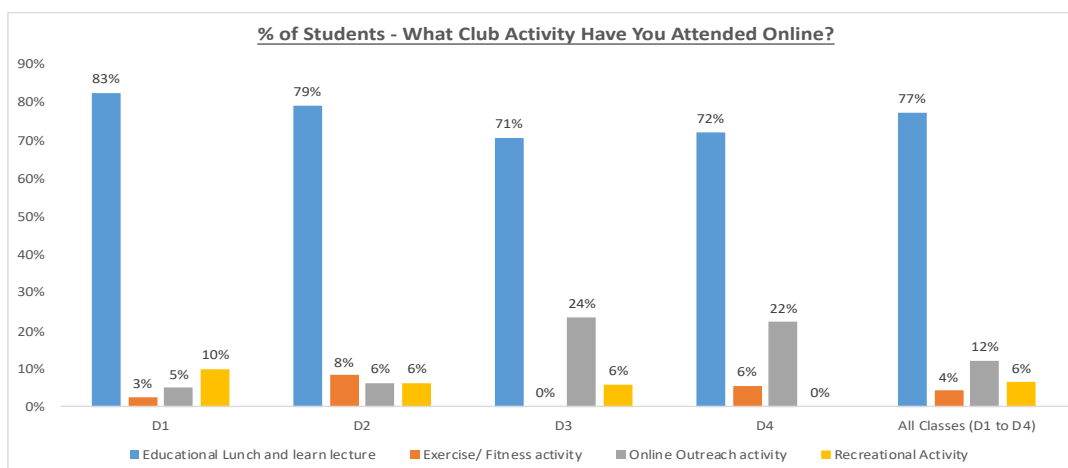


Figure 3: Educational Lunch and Learn Lectures were the best attended online club activity

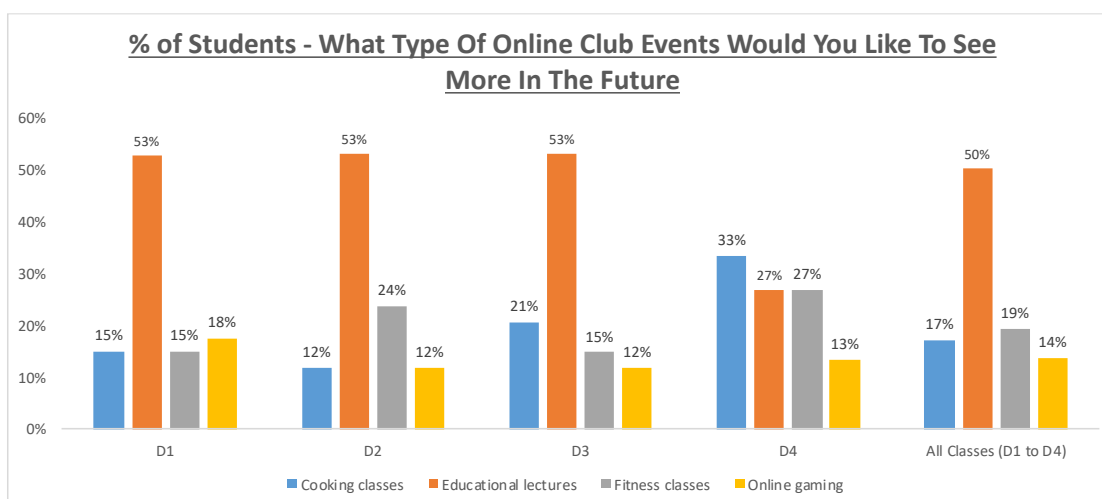


Figure 4: Most students wanted more educational lectures online

Overall the majority of the students felt that online club activities were easier to attend (71%), felt they were less interactive (91%), and felt they were less exciting (85%) as shown in Figure 1. 66% attended less online club events, 67% were less driven to attend online events than in person club events, and 83% felt disconnected from club members as shown in Figure 1. The breakdown of individual classes was similar as shown in Figure 2. As shown in Figure 3, 77% of students attended online educational lectures, 4% attended online exercise/fitness classes, 12% attended online outreach activity, and 6% attended recreational activity online. Students wanted to see more educational lectures (50%) as shown in Figure 4. Other options were less popular: fitness (19%), cooking (17%), and gaming (14%) as shown in Figure 4.

4. DISCUSSION

The COVID- 19 pandemic has changed many aspects of student life. This included the sudden shift to virtual education learning, heavy reliance on technology usages and adaptation to limited social communications [1]. Consequently, telecommunication has dramatically affected the way one interacts and learns from the environment [1]. Involvement in dental school club activities is necessary for students to achieve a well-rounded educational experience. By transitioning club

events to online, students would have opportunities to support one another socially and academically. Depending on their situation, the pandemic had different effects on student lives [2].

Our survey found that dental students in years D1-D4 all felt that online clubs were less exciting (Figure 1 and Figure 2). This may be related to the phenomenon dubbed “Zoom fatigue” or “Zoom burnout.” Online video conferencing applications such as Zoom have allowed us to stay connected and continue our day-to-day meetings at home. However, these online meetings have left us more fatigued than their in-person counterparts. According to an editorial by Wiederhold [3], this phenomenon happens because of a lack of synchrony, loss of body language and non-verbal cues, and increased signals that our brains register as threatening.

The majority of first year dental students had poor perceptions of club promotions and engagement during events. While some preferred the easy accessibility from their own home, others found events to be impersonal and uninteresting. This may be due to the introduction of new environments and the desire to feel connected with the rest of the student body [4].

Shahrivini [5], conducted a survey with first and second year University of California San Diego School of Medicine students and found that only 25.5% of respondents still felt connected to the medical school or classmates. Remote learning also increased anxiety and isolation in the medical students in this survey.

Some participants in our survey also pointed out that not seeing other people’s faces make them feel that they are attending the virtual event on their own. Thus, the virtual event felt more disconnected and less engaging.

Most of the educational online club events followed the structure of online course lectures—a PowerPoint presentation followed by a question-and-answer session. Blurring the distinction between a club event and standard class lecture could have factored into students rating club events as less exciting. It is hard to replicate all the social aspects of in-person club meetings. Students can talk and mingle freely during in-person meetings. But during online meetings, students often had microphones muted and cameras turned off to avoid background noise. Survey responses cited that this made online meetings impersonal and not interactive—and therefore less exciting.

Students think the pandemic impeded their learning and academic progress, and they learned less this year compared to pre-covid years [6] and [7]. As a result, students wanted more educational events to enhance their learning and knowledge gaining experience [8]. This is similar to our survey where Figure 3 shows that the educational lunch and learn activities were the best attended by all classes and Figure 4 showed 50% of students wanted more educational lectures.

A freeform box was included in the survey to collect comments and suggestions for improvement from participants. Many comments felt that online club events were inferior to in-person events. Furthermore, students felt that there were not enough online club events offered and events were not well advertised. However, it is noted that not all collected comments were negative. Positive comments pointed out that educational events, such as online lunch-and-learns, were easier to access online at home. Students were able to converse online and do fitness activities together online. A minority of students also stated that they liked the social aspect of online events, and no changes were needed.

Many of the collected survey comments, mostly from D1 students, felt that online club events did not create a sense of community, were lonely, and felt out of place. This feeling of displacement

may be magnified in D1 students as they are fresh in their first year. To strengthen a sense of community, clubs can mandate a camera-on policy and use Zoom breakout rooms. Breakout rooms create a smaller, friendlier space that facilitates socialization.

Some educational and socialization focused club meetings before the pandemic offered free food during the event. However, this incentive was lost with the transition to online events. If clubs continue to host online events, perhaps they can offer incentives such as prizes, raffles, or food vouchers to increase quality and attendance.

Technical issues could also be a reason for less attendance since online events require stable internet connection and online platform [9]. Technical issues could affect the flow and overall experience of online events. Participants also need to be at home with stable internet to have a good virtual event experience.

Dental students may have attended more of the educational club activities because it possesses similar formats to previous lectures given by the school. Since the social interaction aspect is not as highly anticipated as with typical club events, the contrasts are not widely notable. Therefore, students are more likely to attend educational events hosted by the clubs. Additionally, the high attendance of these events will likely help the students in their academic studies overall as opposed to the optional social events.

The transition to online learning is not perfect and many students felt that it created gaps in the curriculum [10]. D1-D3 students in the didactic and early clinical portions of their education indicated that they wanted to see more educational lectures—perhaps because they may be more driven to fill in educational gaps. D4 students indicated that they were interested in more cooking events. D4 students may already be prepared to graduate and know their post-graduation plans; therefore, they may be more lax, uninterested in additional educational lectures, and turn instead to leisure activities such as cooking. This is shown in Figure 4.

As participants pointed out during this survey, it is hard to find out information on upcoming events. There used to be in-person events that representatives from different student clubs showcase their clubs and activities. Participants could then enroll into the clubs they are interested in. Because of COVID- 19, it is hard to host an in-person club day. It is possible to conduct an online club day event where representatives from each club could present a short introduction about their clubs. Students could then ask questions by entering breakout rooms with a different club per room. Other participants suggested reminder emails to club members because it is hard to find out when the events occur. There may have been less events organized by student clubs due to COVID- 19. Participants in our survey expressed the feeling that they are disconnected from other club members and thus less motivated to attend online events.

It is challenging to come up with new ways to conduct social events that are as engaging as the popular ones like cooking and gaming. One way to promote more options for social events would be to promote collaborations among different student clubs in the dental school or beyond. Participants would be able to meet peers outside their own clubs. Moreover, different student clubs can bring new perspectives and events. For example, the South Asian student association and Chinese student association worked together to conduct virtual outreach to seniors.

5. CONCLUSION

COVID- 19 pandemic has negatively impacted dental school club involvement and activities for dental students across all years. Factors involved in this include telecommunication burn out from students during quarantine and environment differences for social relations. Students felt

that online club activities were less exciting and less interactive. A majority of the students attended online educational lectures but felt less driven to attend other online activities.

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