A Mixed-Methods Study on the Impacts of Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Envisioned Emancipatory Social Work Education at a South African University.

Mfishi Zwelisha

215042167

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Human Sciences), School of Applied Human Sciences, College of Humanities.

Supervisor: Dr Sibonsile Z. Zibane

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‘As the candidate’s supervisor, I approve the submission of this thesis

Signed:  **……...**

Name: **Dr S.Z. Zibane**

Date: **…….**

Declaration of Originality

I, **Mfishi Zwelisha** declare that:

I hereby declare that the thesis presented here, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university. Furthermore, this thesis does not contain any data, tables, figure, graphs, or other information from external sources unless specifically acknowledged. Similarly, it does not include another person's writing unless duly referenced. In cases where external written sources have been incorporated, their ideas have been paraphrased with proper attribution to the original authors. Any exact quotations from other sources have been clearly identified within quotation marks and appropriately cited in accordance with academic standards.

Date

17 December 2024

Dedication

This thesis is for you, Ma, Ms Nonhlanhla Mthembu. You have been my rock through this journey- your love, sacrifices, and belief in me kept me going. Everything I have accomplished is because of your strength and endless support. This work is a reflection of how much you mean to me and how much I owe to your guidance and care. Ndiyabulela Mama.

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Abstract

The adoption of online learning methods by institutions accustomed to face-to-face teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was widely debated. It impacts on professions such as social work which are aimed at emancipatory education and are rooted in critical paradigms, remained unknown. This study examined how online learning impacted the envisioned emancipatory social work education at a South African university. Grounded in emancipatory pedagogy theory and framed within critical and post-positivist paradigms, the study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Data were collected in two phases: a quantitative phase with N=213 participants selected through simple random sampling, and a qualitative phase with 15 participants selected through purposive sampling. Data collection included self-administered questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), for univariate, descriptive, bivariate, multivariate, and mediation analyses, while qualitative data were analysed through critical discourse analysis. Findings were integrated through narrative synthesis and joint display tables. Univariate analysis showed an average age of 20.8 years, with 73.2% female participants. Participants had varying Online Learning (OL) experience: 36.2% (one year), 31.9% (two years), and 31.9% (three years). Descriptive analysis indicated 76.66% incorporation of Epistemological Dialogues (ED) in OL. A significant positive correlation existed between OL and ED ($p < .011$), but not with Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC) ($p = .316$) or Transformative Critical Action (TCA) ($p = .054$). ED correlated positively with TCC ($r = .266$, $p < .001$) and TCA ($r = .332$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis showed ED explained 7.1% variance in TCC ($R^2 = .071$) and 11.6% in TCA ($R^2 = .116$). ED's mediating effect on TCC (-0.0902) and TCA (-0.1582) was indirect and negative. Challenges included lecturer-centred pedagogies, language barriers, passive learning, power dynamics, and the digital divide, impacting ED quality. Although some students developed

TCC, they struggled to translate it into TCA, limiting the realisation of praxis. While OL presented opportunities, it hindered full realisation of emancipatory social work education. Therefore, there is a need for fundamental rethinking of education during crises in social work. In the South Africa, such rethinking should also address historical disadvantages.

Key words: Online learning (OL), Emancipatory Social Work Education; Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC); Transformative Critical Action (TCA); Epistemological Dialogues (ED).

Abbreviations

CC: Critical Consciousness

TCC: Transformative Critical Consciousness

TCA: Transformative Critical Action

CHE: Council for Higher Education

COVID-19: Coronavirus disease/pandemic

ED: Epistemological Dialogues

ERL: Emergency Remote Learning

EROL: Emergency remote online learning

IFSW: International Federation for Social Workers

OL: Online Learning

RSA/SA: Republic of South Africa

SACSSP: South African Council for Social Service Professions

SOTL: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

SPSS: Statistical Package for Social Sciences

T & L: Teaching and Learning

WHO: World Health Organization

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The adoption of online learning in Higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic by institutions accustomed to face-to-face learning has sparked significant debates within the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). These discussions resonate with pre-existing inequalities in South Africa, which are mirrored within higher education and were prominent, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars such as Mhlanga et al. (2022) argue that the onset of COVID-19 coincided with a period when South African public universities were already grappling with challenges related to students' protests over the high and increasing tuition fees, inadequate accommodation, and issues with registration processes. These protests reflected students' outcries with systematic institutional oppression, which is especially pronounced among students from mostly disadvantaged backgrounds. This study acknowledges the enduring impact of South Africa's historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid, which have continued to shape systemic inequalities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Social work education should prepare students to challenge these inequalities within the communities they work with. This study aimed to examine the impact of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on the envisioned emancipatory social work education at a South African university using a mixed-methods enquiry. This chapter introduces the study, focusing on conceptualising and outlining its scope. It begins with a discussion of the background and context, followed by the problem statements which locates the problem within social work education, next it discusses the significance of the study. The chapter then outlines the aim, objectives, and hypotheses assumed by this study. Lastly, it defines and

operationalises concepts as used in this research, closing with the structure of the thesis and conclusion.

1.2. Background and Context of the Study

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in South Africa forced universities to abruptly move towards implementing emergency remote online learning [EROL]. While elements of online learning have surpassed the initial emergency phase, it is not a new phenomenon in South Africa. Online learning has been implemented in contact-based or traditional face-to-face universities as part of blended learning and as the only teaching method for distance learning institutions (Kajiita et al., 2020). However, during the unprecedented time of the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions accustomed to traditional face-to-face methods of teaching and learning needed to move towards the implementation of online learning as a means to save the academic year (Weeden & Cornwell, 2020; Kajiita et al., 2020). The abrupt adoption of online learning meant taking teaching materials designed for face-to-face learning and adapting them into the online learning mode. Barbour et al. (2020) argued that to incorporate online learning into a curriculum, there should be adequate planning time, designing, testing, and implementation. As online learning requires specific methods and pedagogies to be successfully implemented (ibid), its full adoption during the COVID-19 pandemic remained unknown. Moreover, it was unclear whether the processes for effective online learning were adopted in South Africa during this abrupt transition.

The shift from the 'traditional learning' (face-to-face) approach to online learning highlighted the need for technological advancement. Various studies have been conducted to reveal the progress made in this area; for example, Mhlanga and Moloi (2020) argued that South Africa demonstrated significant advancements in technology, which was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent with this, Mohaye (2020) argued that online learning enhanced learning regardless of the physical distance between educators and

students. On the contrary, a study conducted in a rural South African university revealed that professionals struggled with technological methods of teaching (Mncube et al., 2021). Concerns were on the effectiveness and ability of academic staff to apply themselves to facilitate students' understanding. Supporting this argument, Dube (2020) found that rural students struggled to access online teaching and learning methods due to a lack of resources. Additionally, Tamrat and Teferra (2020) stated that during 2020, only 24% of the population had access to the internet; poor connections, costs and power outages posed were serious and persistent challenges in Africa. South Africa is not immune to these issues, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds experienced similar challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (Makhanya and Mfishi, 2023). Evidently, in these arguments, there are contestations among various scholars regarding online learning, the extent to which it offers equal access, and whether South Africa was ready for this transformation.

In a country such as South Africa, where there are various historical experiences entrenched in oppressive systems, i.e. slavery, colonialization and apartheid (Worden, 2012)- the education system should be a form of emancipation and be a means of allowing students to move towards equality. However, the institutions of higher learning have been reported by scholars as a mirror for the inequalities [exacerbated by oppressive systems] (Makhanya, 2021; Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). The role of social workers becomes important to assist in alleviating such disparities- Casimir and Samuel (2013) state that social workers are compelled to critically use their minds as they work in environments with high human suffering and social ills stemming from past oppressive systems. As a result, for social workers to be effective in practising within a historically disadvantaged country, they must be emancipated to ensure they uphold the standards of anti-oppressive social work approaches (Dominelli & Campling, 2002). Hence, education tailored toward social work students should be emancipatory, empowering, and offer human freedom (Dube, 2020; Sewpaul, 2013;

Gaddafi, 1975 & Freire, 1970).

In addition to the above, the ultimate goal of social work education should be to assist students in transforming ‘common sense’ into ‘good sense’ (Gramsci, 1971). Various questions have been raised regarding the capacity of online learning to facilitate the attainment of this educational goal. At a point of ‘good sense’, students would have developed critical consciousness (both transformative critical consciousness [TCC] & transformative critical action [TCA]) (Jemal, 2017). In this way, they would be able to engage in ultimate transformation, where not only do they reflect on their historical experiences in their education, but they can challenge and act against the status quo (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020; Sewpaul, et al., 2011; Freire, 1970). To achieve this, students should engage in epistemological dialogues that evoke critical thinking, empowerment, and problem-solving skills (Alajlan & Aljohani, 2021; Freire, 1970).

Given the rapid adoption of online learning in South African institutions of higher learning, it was in the interest of the study to measure the impact of COVID-19-induced online learning on social work students’ emancipatory education at a South African university. To do so, the study (1) determined the extent to which epistemological dialogues were utilised and established how these were used during online learning; (2) determined the extent to which social work students developed critical consciousness and explored the impact of online learning on the development of critical consciousness; (3) investigated the mediating role of epistemological dialogues on the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness and established how epistemological dialogues contributed to critical consciousness during online learning in South Africa.

1.3. Problem Statement

According to the Global Definition of Social Work:

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and Indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing" (IFSW, 2014).

This definition locates the social work profession and academic discipline within a critical, emancipatory, and socially engaged paradigm. This conceptualisation pinpoints the educational journey of social work students within a transformative praxis that seeks to develop critical consciousness and socially engaged agents of change (Freire, 1970; Sewpaul, 2013). Accordingly, the teaching and learning of social work involve extensive debates, reflective dialogue, and pedagogical approaches that develop students' capacity for critical thinking, reflexivity, and emancipatory practice (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Sewpaul et al., 2011; Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). As a result, the modules taught are historical, political, and economic and place a need on anti-oppressive practice, which is crucial for emancipatory education in social work.

Scholars such as Sakamoto and Pitner (2005), Sewpaul et al. (2011), and Makhanya and Zibane (2020) among a few others, support participatory education, reflective, relational learning, and the use of epistemological dialogues in ensuring that Social Work students develop critical consciousness. These elements should not merely be a participation method but should ensure that students are active critical agents and thinkers (Skidmore, 2006). Motloung and Mzinyane (2023, pg.403) argued that, "Social work education is the praxis of preparing future professionals for the real-life challenges that confront humankind."- but the

praxis aspect of the social work education remained unknown during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, due to the rapid adoption of online learning in social work across South Africa by contact-based universities, it remained unclear what the impact of this has been on students' emancipatory education. On the other hand, the limitations of online learning, such as digital divides; the challenges of fostering meaningful interpersonal connections; and the risk of reinforcing passive modes of learning; the stresses and disruptions caused by the pandemic, were the cause of concern on the ability of students to engage in the deep, reflective, and socially engaged learning required for the development of critical consciousness in social work education. Hence, this research sought to study the impacts of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on the envisioned emancipatory social work education at a South African university.

1.4. Significance

This study expands on what is known about social work academic education as it relates to the use of online learning in South African universities. This research illuminates the complexities and challenges faced during the transition to online teaching methodologies in social work education through a mixed-methods inquiry. The findings significantly contribute to programme review and offer evidence-based recommendations for enhancing current teaching and learning methods, with a focus on meaningful developments in curriculum transformation.

Central to this research was the examination of critical consciousness development and the use of epistemological dialogues in social work education. This study provides crucial evidence highlighting specific areas where current social work education falls short in achieving the envisioned emancipatory education. Identifying these gaps is particularly significant given that the development of critical consciousness, reflective dialogue, and praxis are essential components in equipping social work students with the knowledge, skills,

and values necessary to challenge oppressive structures and work collaboratively with communities towards collective empowerment and liberation (Sewpaul, 2013; Lombard & Twikirize, 2014).

This research reveals that the transition to online learning during the pandemic hindered the development of critical emancipatory elements in social work education. This finding has substantial implications for the profession's capacity to advance social justice and drive transformative social change. Through critical analysis, this study illustrates how these limitations affect the preparation of future social workers and their ability to engage in meaningful, transformative practice. Additionally, the research makes a valuable contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning by deepening the understanding of emancipatory pedagogy in online spaces. Notably, it contributes to the decoloniality movement by focusing on context specific work, specifically examining students' learning experiences within the South African context. This localised focus ensures that the findings are directly applicable and relevant to the unique challenges and opportunities of South African higher education.

The research findings also highlight the need for adaptive strategies in social work education to maintain and enhance the development of critical consciousness, even within online learning environments. With evidence of the limitations and potential of online teaching and learning methodologies, this study provides a foundation for developing more effective approaches to social work education that remain true to the profession's transformative and emancipatory objectives, even when delivered through online platforms.

1.5. Location of the Study

Critical consciousness represents the critical analysis of oppressed and previously disadvantaged populations on social conditions, inequality, and current affairs (Diemer et al., 2017). This explanation located the study within a university with historically disadvantaged students. This study was conducted at a University in the KwaZulu-Natal province, South

Africa (*the institution is not mentioned for ethical reasons*). According to Odeyemi (2021); Equality Report (2018), South Africa is one of the historically oppressed countries, and Africans continue to experience many inequalities in South Africa. In addition, African students further battle with issues of inequalities, especially in institutions of higher learning (Makhanya, 2021). The university recorded n= 33 292 registered African students in 2017 (Sourced at the University Report, 2017). Recent statistics reveal that the university had a total of n=37 498 African Students in 2023, a significant increase from 2017 (HEDA, 2024).

1.6. Aim and Objectives

Aim

To study the impacts of online learning during COVID-19 pandemic on the envisioned emancipatory social work education at a South African university.

Objectives

- To determine the extent to which epistemological dialogues were utilised and establish how these were used during online learning in social work education.
- To determine the extent to which social work students developed critical consciousness (i.e., transformative critical consciousness and transformative critical action) and explore the impact of online on the development of critical consciousness.
- To investigate the mediating role of epistemological dialogues on the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness and establish how epistemological dialogues contributed towards critical consciousness during online learning in South Africa.

1.7. Research questions

- To what extent were epistemological dialogues utilised during online learning on social work education in South Africa, and how were they used?
- To what extent did social work students develop critical consciousness (i.e. transformative critical consciousness and transformative critical action), and what is the impact of Online learning on the development of critical consciousness?
- What is the mediating role of epistemological dialogues on the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness, and how did epistemological dialogues contribute to critical consciousness during online learning in South Africa?

1.8. Hypotheses

H0: Online learning does not result in the development of critical consciousness

H1: Online learning results in the development of critical consciousness

H0: Online learning does not increase the use of epistemological dialogues

H2: Online learning increases the use of epistemological dialogues

H0: Epistemological dialogues do not mediate the relationship between online learning and critical consciousness

H3: Epistemological dialogues mediate the relationship between online learning and critical consciousness.

1.9. Definition of Key Terms:

COVID-19 pandemic refers to the global outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease that began in late 2019 and has had widespread social, economic, and health impacts around

the world that have disproportionately affected disadvantaged communities and exacerbated existing inequities (United Nations Development South Africa, 2020)

Critical consciousness is the process by which [students] deepen awareness of the social realities that shape their lives and their capacity to transform that reality (Freire, 1970; Diemer et al., 2017). It involves critically understanding one's social, political, and economic context and committing to challenge and transform oppressive structures. In this study, students who develop critical consciousness are viewed as not merely understanding reality in fragments but striving to have a total vision of the context before separating and analysing its constituent elements and engaging in praxis.

Emancipatory Education is a pedagogical approach that aims to develop critical consciousness and promote transformation through learning (Freire, 1970). In this study, it is employed to emphasise epistemological dialogues over the traditional 'banking' education, where all students actively participate in knowledge creation rather than passively receive information. This philosophy seeks to empower students to recognise and challenge social inequalities and oppression (Giroux, 2011), fostering what Freire termed 'conscientização' - the ability to perceive socio-political contradictions and act against oppressive elements of reality. It views education as a practice of freedom that can lead to personal and social liberation through critical reflection and action, or 'praxis' (Nouri & Sajjadi, 2014).

Epistemological dialogues refer to engaging in critical discussions and exchanges about the nature of knowledge, its construction, and its relationship to power and oppression (Friere,1970). Epistemological dialogues in Social Work education represent dynamic, multi-modal learning interactions that challenge traditional knowledge hierarchies through critical engagement, reflection, and collaborative meaning-making. These dialogues encompass various forms of knowledge exchange, from debates and discussions to critical

analyses, aimed at developing deeper understanding through participatory and reflexive learning. Emphasis is on students being treated as active agents in learning (Skidmore, 2006).

Online learning refers to delivering educational content and instruction through digital platforms and technologies rather than in-person (Hodges et al., 2020). Council for higher education (2014) states that it involves both asynchronous (where students are not required to be online at the same time for the learning session) and synchronous (students are required to learn online simultaneously, similar to a face-to-face session).

Social Work Emancipatory Education is an approach to social work education that prepares students to challenge systemic oppression and promote social justice through transformative learning experiences (Morley et al., 2019). In this study, social work emancipatory education emphasises the development of critical consciousness (TCC and TCA) so that students can engage in critical, transformative, and emancipatory practices.

Transformative Critical Action (TCA) refers to the concrete steps and strategies individuals and communities take to challenge and transform oppressive structures (Alajlan & Aljohani, 2021). Giroux (2011) asserts that this includes engaging in social and political activism, challenging dominant narratives, and working to create more just and equitable social, political, and economic systems.

Transformative critical consciousness (TCC) refers to the awareness and analysis of oppressive structures, including a commitment to acting, challenging and transforming those structures (Alajlan & Aljohani, 2021). It involves developing a critical understanding of the world, one's role in transforming it, and the motivation and skills to act.

1.10. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis comprises nine chapters, outlined below:

Chapter 1-Introduction*:* This chapter is an introductory chapter of this thesis, which conceptualises the entire research, locates it and details how it was undertaken.

Chapter 2- Literature review*:* Moving from broad to specific contents, this chapter positions the study within the key variables explored. Conceptualisation and operationalisation are evident with identifying the research gap and how it is addressed in this study. Commencing with a historical narrative is particularly important for this study, as it draws connection between South Africa's history and current implications.

Chapter 3-Theory: This chapter locates this study within a theoretical framework, identifying how the emancipatory pedagogy theory was used and its relevance. The theoretical model, based on findings from this study, is essential to ponder.

Chapter 4- Methodology: This chapter is the soul of this research, answering questions of what, why and how. it documents the entire research journey, how the study was conducted, the paradigms adopted, how data was analysed and the limitations thereof. The discussion of how the findings have been integrated within this mixed-methods enquiry is essential.

Chapter 5- Results: This is the first section of the results, locating socio-demographic details of participants within the South African context that has pre-existing inequities, the digital divide, and what it means as it relates to the findings of this study. This chapter also focuses on basic descriptive statistics, laying the foundation for the subsequent results chapters. This chapter is imperative for grounding the analysis and interpreting the findings thereof.

Chapter 6- Results: This chapter focuses on the study's first objective, drawing on the quantitative and qualitative findings, which are then integrated and discussed using narrative

integration. It focuses on the findings relating to the extent to which epistemological dialogues were evident during online learning and the nature of these dialogues.

Chapter 7-Results: This chapter focuses on the second objective of this study; it analyses results and provides discussion on the development of critical consciousness amongst social work students during online learning using joint-display table and narrative integration to provide a comprehensive picture of findings.

Chapter 8- Results: This chapter focuses on the third objective of this study; it uses both a joint display table and narrative integration to present and discuss findings. The key is the mediating role of epistemological dialogues on critical consciousness (TCC and TCA). The use of process macro to understand this mediating effect is crucial.

Chapter 9- Conclusion: This chapter summarises the study and provides key findings, major conclusions and implications of this study to social work education, practice, and research. It also provides implications for higher education. Notably, the implications offer recommendations, which are tied to the findings of this study.

1.11. Conclusion

This chapter has provided an outline of the study, beginning with a discussion of the background and context, identifying the research problem within social work education, and then detailing the significance of this study. The aims, objectives, and hypotheses that guide the research have also been outlined. Furthermore, this chapter defined and operationalised key concepts pertinent to this research. Overall it provided a comprehensive overview, setting the stage for subsequent chapters in this study.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter begins with a review of descriptive literature, followed by critical reflective analysis of the history of South Africa, focusing on the impact of colonialization and apartheid on social work and social work education in its current form. It then discusses the history of social work, its relevance and how history has shaped contemporary social work education and practice. Additionally, the chapter discusses the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the institutions of Higher learning in South Africa. This discussion moves towards locating South African students during COVID-19 pandemic, with reference to the oppressive systems that have historically impacted South Africans. The chapter further provides a critical narrative on the online learning pedagogy within South African institutions of higher learning. It compares social work education before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion then shifts to the conceptualisation of major variables as measured in this study, paving the way for a review of literature related to the objectives of this study. This chapter also introduces the relevant legislative and policy frameworks that align with the objectives of this study. Lastly, a conclusion is provided outlining the major research gaps and summarising the chapter. This chapter is grounded in an emancipatory pedagogy framework.

2.2. South African History: Impact of Colonialization and Apartheid on Social Work and Social Work Education in South Africa

South African history dates back to before slavery, colonialism and apartheid. However, these oppressive systems which are rooted in imperialism, violence, and the segregation of the people of African descent living in South Africa, have often defined the country's

historical narrative. While there is no single definition of colonialism or apartheid, scholars such as Arneil (2024); Kumar (2021), when zoning in colonialism versus imperialism, give a sense that colonialism is a practice of domination that involves the subjugation of one group of people by another. So often, it is difficult to separate colonialism from imperialism, as the two concepts are frequently treated as synonyms. Similar to colonialism, Imperialism also involves political and economic control over a dependent territory. However, the etymology of the two terms provides some clues about how they differ. The word "colony" comes from the Latin word "colonus," meaning farmer, which suggests that colonialism typically involved the transfer of a population to a new territory, where the settlers lived as permanent residents while maintaining political allegiance to their country of origin. Imperialism, on the other hand, refers to the control of territories already occupied and organized by indigenous societies. It is crucial to note that Colonialism was the systematic oppression of African people, mostly by European imperialists. Apartheid, as a concept and policy, began to emerge in intellectual discussions in the 1930s. It was a system founded on the segregation and oppression of people of colour, mostly being Black Africans (Langa et al., 2021). Alloggio (2020, pg.1) argues that "…colonialism, imperialism, and slavery, to which Africans and people of African descent were subjected, have not been eradicated, instead these have taken on new forms: neo-slavery, neo-imperialism, neo-Colonialism, and the new racism". The recurrent resurgence of such oppressive indirect systems has consequently had generational implications that are non-reversible for the oppressed. For example, Biko (1978) articulated the long-term effects of the Apartheid system, such as internalised oppression, and the presence of insecure leaders within the political space – leaders who cannot decide for themselves but rather rely on the inputs of white men (*sic*).

The above is further supported by Odeyemi (2021) in the analysis of South African citizens within a 'post-apartheid' era where emphasis is placed on the effects of the

oppressive system to the current state of South Africa. Scholars such as Richter et al. (2020) deliberate on the importance of challenging systematic inequalities, advocating against internalising forms and means of white neoliberals. Unfortunately, political structures in South Africa continue to replicate forms of historical oppression, which has had devastating consequences for ordinary South African citizens who continue to battle with poverty, inequality, injustices, poor infrastructure, and unemployment; These persistent issues highlight the need for liberation- mentally, socially, economically, and philosophically- as they continue to shape various facets and spheres of South African societies.

While South African history is not limited solely to the oppressive systems, they are critical in understanding the context in which the country's current challenges have emerged. The history of South Africa dates back to the millennium B.C., during the era of the ancestors of the Hunter-gatherers, ancestors of the Khoisan (Khoikhoi and San often referred to as 'Hottentots' and 'Bushmen'), living in Southern Africa, and the A.D. 300, when the mixed farmers, ancestors of the majority of Bantu-speaking people began settling in the Limpopo River (Thomson, 2001). However, the emphasis here is on the impact of the oppressive systems, as they have had huge implications on the state of current affairs, be it in the economy, culture, politics, and mental well-being of the society. While the oppressive systems are not in the scope of this thesis, they provide an essential foundation, lens, and perspective for the arguments made in this work. Additionally, they contribute significantly towards depicting a clear view and understanding of the context in which South African societies are located. The argument made is that these oppressive systems did not only affect people but also shaped how professions, including social work were practised. For example, the impact of apartheid was immense in the social work and social welfare sector in South Africa. A brief review of the history of social work in South Africa is, therefore, necessary to

fully understand the impact of these oppressive systems on the education and practice of social work.

2.3. History of Social Work in South Africa

The history of social work in indigenous African communities is deeply connected to the cultural, social, and historical contexts of the continent. Social work, in various forms, has existed in these communities for centuries, driven by the need to address social challenges, provide support, and maintain communal well-being. However, the history of social work as a profession has a long-standing history that is rooted in the oppressive systems in South Africa. It is argued that during apartheid, social work education and practice were characterised by discriminatory principles (Mamphiswana & Noyoo, 2000). Social workers are obliged to abide by the constitution and implement policies, but they are also responsible for challenging injustices and systemic issues (Council for higher education [CHE], 2015). However, social workers who trained and practised during the periods of systemic oppression were direct and indirect perpetrators of oppression when rendering their services. This is evident in the South Africa's social welfare system during apartheid, where access to welfare services was based on race. Mamphiswana and Noyoo (2000) assert that the distribution of social welfare services, such as social grants, was merely based on the colour of the skin, adhering to the racial classifications under apartheid, which influenced both access and redistribution.

The studies on poor white poverty in 1932, leading to the Carnegie Commission of Inquiry in 1934, played a huge role in shaping the apartheid system of segregation, which saw social workers at the forefront of the implementation of programs (Potgieter, 1998). Patel (1992) as cited in Khunou et al. (2012, pg. 123) stated that this led to "a privileging of social ills experienced by whites, and it contributed to the formation of a social welfare department and the training of social workers in the 1930s". However, these developments reinforced the

already existing patterns of racial advantage and disadvantage in South Africa (Khunou et al., 2012), exacerbating the disempowerment of the majority of South Africa's black population. Institutional racism was at the centre of these formations (Mamphiswana and Noyoo, 2000). Noteworthily, Freire (1970) warned against the fake humanitarianism that is offered by the oppressor to the oppressed, which mirrors the situation in South Africa, where the welfare system reinforced the oppression of the black majority. This sound evidence against the oppressed (Blacks/Africans) should bring one to be cognisant of the long-documented implications when the oppressors become the providers of basic necessities. While the whites were the main beneficiaries of this welfare state, there is clear evidence to suggest that it was against the majority of black people.

The above raises several questions regarding the social work education system at the time. Social workers are mandated to be ethical, principled, and advocates for justice (CHE, 2015). Therefore, it is important to that the current education system trains social work students to be independent thinkers, able to critically analyse and apply themselves to the needs of service users, to enforce the dialogues of transformation within societies (Sewpaul et al., 2011). Such training ensures that social workers and students do not reproduce systemic/ societal oppression. Anand (2009, pg. 97) provided a holistic view of social work education, stating that "social work pedagogy combines an analysis of psychosocial, economic and political contexts and methods of active intervention and administration of social welfare". This perspective highlights social workers should be equipped with skills and understanding necessary to respond effectively to the country's challenges. Additionally, they should be trained in a manner that will allow them to challenge to status quo if it is not serving the people. (Sewpaul et al., 2011; Freire, 1970).

2.4. Relevance and Significance of South African History in Social Work Practice and Education

According to Flem et al. (2021), social workers are the products of and role players in the socio-political, economic, and cultural ideologies, all derived from "normalised" and unchallenged dialogues. Therefore, understanding the history of politics, culture, economics, and social conditions is crucial to understanding the role of the social work profession and how it has been impacted by history over time. Due to the nature of South Africa's history, which is rooted in violence, racism, and internalised oppression, to list a few, there is a need for an educational curriculum to address and undo the cognitive damage perpetuated by past experiences (Amin et al., 2016). South African universities are believed to have continued to be complicit in perpetuating cognitive damage through symbolic violence associated with indifference to race categorisation, inequalities, poverty, and cultural hegemony, in their curricula (Amin et al., 2016). As such, social workers and social work students in South Africa must be cognisant of the country's history and current affairs in order to transform the spaces and challenge the status quo, inequalities, and injustices. The curriculum components in social work education should introduce students to such aspects, but not be limited to them. An alternative approach, such as Freire's (1970) concept of emancipatory pedagogy, should be introduced to ensure the transformation of social work students. Social work students should be prepared and equipped for intervention processes and interactions with historically disadvantaged societies.

The documented history of South Africa is dominated by colonialization and apartheid – two oppressive periods that have deeply affected the country and its people. To date, the effects of these periods are deemed massive by the majority of South African people. According to Worden (2012), both apartheid and colonialism involved not only racial segregation and oppression of blacks, but also the exploitation of cheap labour, deprivation of

resources, and denial of land ownership. As a result, in 2016, South Africa had a population of approximately 55.7 million people, with more than half of this population living in poverty (Statistics South Africa, 2021). This statistic highlights the ongoing economic challenges in South Africa, which are integral to understanding the well-being of the society at large.

The impacts of Colonialism, and Apartheid on South African communities are well-documented and continue to affect various aspects of life, such as education, class or economic status, race, gender, or philosophy and psychology of South Africans. Gaddafi (1975) and Biko (1978) argued that the effects of slavery, Colonialism, and Apartheid were dire and detrimental to the mindset, economic freedom, and the quality of education black people would receive. For example, Black South Africans remain the most disadvantaged group in terms of economic freedom (Equality Report, 2018). Notably, the inequality issues in South Africa have boiled down to affect the mental well-being of the majority of the population.

Hegemonic practices continue to contribute significantly to the inequalities evident in post-apartheid South Africa, and mental slavery continues to resonate with many. Based on the assessment of the current state of South Africa, it is evident that the oppressed have become the oppressors (Freire, 1970), with the state now dominated by capitalism, white monopoly capital, and corruption across various sectors. Additionally, Biko (1978) asserted that because of deliberate subordination, disintegration, and marginalization, Black South Africans experience an "inferiority complex". There is a clear relationship between the present-day challenges faced by South Africans and the oppressive periods, as such internalised oppression has been a subject of discussion from scholars such as Biko (1978); Sewpaul (2013). What is identified above talks to the mental well-being of the citizens of South Africa, and social workers play a critical role in this context. However, their effectiveness begins with the shaping of students who are prepared to practice with awareness

and sensitivity to the challenges and injustices faced by South Africa's historically disadvantaged communities.

2.5. COVID-19 in South Africa

The outbreak of COVID-19 introduced new dimensions and challenges to the existing issues that South African citizens were already grappling with. This section discusses COVID-19 in South Africa, both as a disease and as a pandemic. Due to the multitude of communities in South Africa, understanding the impact of COVID-19 in South Africa requires a multidimensional approach to cover the full extent of the effects brought by the pandemic. However, before delving into this, it is important to first provide a conceptualisation of COVID-19.

Conceptualisation of COVID-19

COVID-19, also known as the Corona Virus, is a respiratory disease that presents a range of symptoms, including dry cough, shortness of breath, fever, and sore throat systems (He et al., 2020). Its origins can be traced back to 2019, when the first case emerged in Wuhan City, China (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020; He et al., 2020). The pandemic rapidly spread across the globe, and the first confirmed case in South Africa was recorded in March 2020 (South Africa Corona Virus, 2021). As the country strived to curb the spread of the Corona Virus, strict restrictions and adjustments to rules were imposed. These measures presented several changes in the ways of living for the citizens as the country entered a series of lockdowns, with rules being continually adjusted based on the wave of the pandemic. These changes had various effects on individuals, groups, communities, and the economy of the country.

COVID-19 Pandemics' Effects on Societies

Scholars such as Zizek (2020) have often used the metaphor of "we're all in the same boat" to describe the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that everyone is affected the same.

However, scholars such as Alloggio (2020) rejected such a notion and maintained that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have not been the same for the people of African descent. As previously noted, these communities have been the recipients of the consequences of the oppressive systems. As mentioned above, the COVID-19 is associated with multidimensional effects. In South Africa, COVID-19 resulted in an increased level of unemployment due to retrenchments and closing of businesses, increased poverty, exacerbated inequality, gender-based violence; increased divorce and separation rates, and loss of life (United Nations Development South Africa, 2020). On an individual level, Hacimusalar et al. (2020) stated that COVID-19 affected the mental and physical health of individuals. Additionally, a study conducted by Wallengren-Lynch et al. (2023) reported that individuals (teachers and students) also faced personal challenges related to boundaries, and these were caused by the shift from working or studying in physical spaces every day to working from home that they needed to adjust to. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the well-being of individuals within communities. However, it is important to note that due to the diverse nature of South African communities including differences in economic statuses, and other intrinsic factors – individuals were affected differently by the effect of the pandemic.

2.6. COVID-19 Pandemic and Higher Learning Institutions in South Africa

Universities in South Africa were affected by the pandemic due to the lockdown regulations. In response to challenges caused by the pandemic, contact universities in South Africa, along with institutions across the world, were forced to adopt new ways of teaching and learning. According to Weeden and Cornwell (2020), universities shifted from traditional in-person methods of teaching and learning to online learning, while some institutions also adopted blended learning approaches. Blended learning was not entirely new to South Africa, as students had previously used online platforms such as Moodle, and eLearning to access

learning materials. However, the content was not taught online via online platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The shift to these new leaning methods meant that the semesters were delayed, as strategic planning was needed to accommodate the new normal (Mncube et al., 2021). This transition introduced new technological methods for teaching and learning, which posed challenges for students and staff. Nonetheless, there was a need for adjustment.

From the above, questions may be raised regarding the readiness of South African institutions to effectively implement these new methods of teaching and learning. Mncube et al. (2021) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic presented incomparable challenges within the South African Higher education system, not only for students but also for teaching academic staff, especially in rural universities. As South Africa is a diverse country stricken by significant inequalities, it is then in the interest of this study to explore the impact of these new methods on previously disadvantaged students. In light of the country's history, questions should be constantly raised relating to how these shifts align with the goals of emancipatory pedagogy and transformation in education, as part of constitutional objectives.

2.7. Locating South African Students in History and within the South African Education System in current circumstances (COVID-19)

Students across all ethnicities within the higher education system have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in their academic and personal lives. However, the effects have been especially pronounced for historically disadvantaged students. The phenomenon of inquiry in universities should centre around South African students due to the oppressive systems that have historically exacerbated inequalities related to class, gender, and race in South African communities. South African families were severely impacted by the pandemic, yet they continued to battle with the lingering effects of the past [oppressive systems] (Odeyemi, 2021). South African students are the products of their families, as such they found themselves confronting both the challenges posed by COVID-19and the ongoing effects of

past disparities.

Questions should be raised regarding the accessibility of the new modes of teaching and learning; the availability of resources; the acquisition of critical thinking skills. and how these factors influenced students' education. Mncube et al. (2021) noted that students in rural universities struggled with technological access, emphasising the need to address these ongoing barriers. African Students play a crucial role in giving a true reflection of the impacts of COVID-19 on their academic education, critical thinking, transformation, and overall development. As such, this study is situated within an institution that has a predominance of African students.

2.8. Digital divide in South African institutions of higher learning

South Africa is still grappling with inequalities, despite numerous attempts to address them through policy development and amendments in higher education institutions. The National Plan for Higher Education (2001) aims to address the pervasive inequalities in higher education, but the transformation agenda outlined in the Higher Education Act (RSA, 1997) is still difficult to achieve. Scholars such as Mpungose (2020) argued that these policies and amendments have not benefited the majority of previously disadvantaged black South African students, particularly in terms of accessing online learning. Similarly, Makhanya and Zibane (2020) contended that South African universities continue to reflect deep-seated inequalities.

A study by Makhanya and Mfishi (2023) revealed that previously disadvantaged students continued to experience oppression due to persistent inequalities in South African universities, with the shift to emergency remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating these disadvantages. This is important because the research site for this study was dominated by Black African students. To understand how online learning impacted emancipatory education for social work students, it is crucial to consider their specific

context. The context in which they exist in higher education is characterised by the digital and social divide, which has implications for their learning experiences during COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 5 of this study unpacks this phenomenon and reality in depth, drawing on the findings attained in this study.

2.9. Online learning pedagogy in South African Institutions of Higher Education

Definition: The Conceptual and operational clarity

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, South African institutions of higher learning adopted emergency remote online learning (EROL), which is argued to be grounded in online learning pedagogy and methodology. This chapter aims to first clarify the differences and similarities between online learning and EROL, and to provide justification for the adoption of online learning over EROL/ Blending learning or concepts that are associated with using technological resources in learning. An insight is provided in the following paragraphs.

Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has been conceptualised in various ways across the globe, including distance learning, blended learning, emergency remote learning, online learning, digital learning, e-learning, or computer-based learning (Meyer, 2018; Singh & Thurman, 2023). However, what cuts across all these concepts is that it is rooted in the shift towards the use of technological resources for teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, learning during the COVID-19 pandemic is referred to as online learning, even though there are scholars, such as Hodges et al. (2020), who refer to this kind of learning as Emergency Remote Learning (ERL), arguing that it differs from online learning. They define ERL as a temporary educational system set up quickly during crises to provide ‘reliable’ access to learning (Hodges et al., 2020). However, there is enough evidence to suggest that ERL during the COVID-19 pandemic is a form of online learning (Singh & Thurman, 2023; Meyer, 2018). In the South African context, ERL was a form of online

learning.

Consistent with the arguments above, this study draws from a systematic literature review conducted by Singh and Thurman (2021), which revealed that many of the concepts used to describe learning during the COVID-19 pandemic are rooted in online learning's groundwork. As such, online learning can be considered an overarching term that encompasses all these concepts. Meyer (2018) defines online learning as any form of teaching or instruction delivered through a digital device to support learning. This definition includes characteristics of distance learning, blended learning, and even emergency remote learning. As early as 2002, Curtain gave a broader definition of online learning, stating:

> *"Online learning can be broadly defined as the use of the internet in some way to enhance the interaction between teacher and student. Online delivery covers both asynchronous forms of interaction such as assessment tools and the provision of web-based course materials and synchronous interaction through email, newsgroups, and conferencing tools, such as chat groups. It includes both classroom-based instruction and as well as distance education modes. Other terms synonymous with online learning are 'web-based education' and 'e-learning." (Curtain, 2002 cited in Singh and Thurman, 2023, pg., 293).*

Based on this definition, it is clear that online learning has long existed and is not a new phenomenon. While this is an extensive definition, it raises questions about what online learning is and whether traditional face-to-face institutions were already using online learning methods before the COVID-19 pandemic. To address these questions, there is a need to understand another method that is related to online learning – blended learning- which combines face-to-face instruction with technological resources to enhance teaching and learning (Meyer, 2018). Empirical evidence shows that blended learning was mostly

applicable and used within institutions of higher learning prior to the pandemic, before the adoption of EROL.

Method of Online Learning Pedagogy

According to Conn (2004), to successfully implement online learning there are certain steps and processes which should be applied. Barbour et al. (2020) identified four crucial steps necessary for the successful implementation of online learning namely: adequate planning time; designing of the online content; testing and implementing. It is clear that before implementing the pedagogy of online learning, institutions needed to pay attention to these details for the effective use of online learning methods. However, it remains unknown whether South African universities followed these steps during the COVID-19 pandemic and whether enough time was allocated to the implementation of each step.

Scholars such as Weeden and Cornwell (2020) were explicit in stating that the universities implemented EROL mainly to save the academic calendar year. As noted by various scholars, including Dube (2020), Weeden and Cornwell (2020), Kajiita et al. (2020), and Makhanya and Mfishi (2023), there have been challenges in implementing online learning in South Africa, suggesting inadequate planning and improper execution of the steps outlined by Barbour et al. (2020).

Advantages and Prospects of online learning in South Africa

Despite its challenges and shortcomings, online learning has been recognized as a valuable method for ensuring access to education. This is evident in distance learning institutes, where a large population of students can be enrolled (Appanna, 2008). Appanna (2008) further acknowledged that universities can benefit from online learning's improved quality of learning, better preparation of students for a knowledge-based society, and "lifelong" learning opportunity. Noteworthily, Appanna's research was conducted in a European context, the experiences shared will differ from the ones in South Africa. Scholars have

alluded to the fact that online learning, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, fuelled South Africa's entry into the fourth industrial revolution (Hlatshwayo, 2022). It is further noted that South Africa has had huge success in terms of technological infrastructure, even though many disadvantaged students still faced substantial barriers.

Mhlanga and Moloi (2020) argued that South Africa has demonstrated excellence in technological advancement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Mohaye (2020) asserted that online learning enhanced learning regardless of the physical distance between students and educators. In a study conducted in South Africa, social work students acknowledged the flexibility offered by online learning, the opportunity to learn in their comfort spaces, and the support they received while learning online (Makhanya and Mfishi, 2023). However, this research is concerned with the development of knowledge and critical consciousness during this period of learning online, both of which are paramount for social work students.

Shortcomings of online learning and associated critics in its current form

Some of the documented early shortcomings of online learning were that students spent much time learning how to adapt to online learning due to unfamiliarity (Conn, 2004). This demanded that students take time in advancing and re-adjusting their learning strategies. In South Africa, learning is restricted by evasive structural issues which include, but are not limited to electrical cuts, network challenges, and systematic disparities (Dube, 2020; Tamrat & Teferra, 2020). In the early years, Conn (2004) noted that barriers to a successful implementation of the online learning pedagogy included low bandwidth, lack of personal organisation, and unfamiliarity with the content or learning management system (eLearning sites) being used by institutions. Similarly, Makhanya and Mfishi (2023) highlighted challenges with both blended learning and online learning in South Africa, including, but were not limited to inequalities (leading to a lack of eLearning resources), computer illiteracy

amongst students, and pedagogical issues. Institutional preparedness as well as student readiness remained central issues affecting the successful implementation of the online learning pedagogy (Appanna, 2008). These factors inhibit the effective use of eLearning platforms in South Africa.

While online learning has clear benefits, its shortcomings are particularly evident in institutions that are accustomed to traditional face-to-face methods of learning. This calls for scrutiny in how the institutions incorporate online methods in their teaching and learning practices. Further scrutiny and assessment should be particularly focused for professions within the Applied Human Sciences.

2.10. Social Work Education Prior to COVID-19 Pandemic's Online Learning

Online learning was also not a new phenomenon in social work education, as traditional online methods such as the use of social media, video-conferencing, and Moodle platforms had been used, especially in the United States of America (USA) and European countries (Forgey, Ortega-Williams, 2016). Similarly, online learning has been used before the COVID-19 pandemic by institutions that specialise in distance education, such as the University of South Africa (UNISA). According to Hamilton et al. (2017), distance education is "traditionally defined as an educational program in which the students and instructor are separated by location, and it can take on many forms. Video conferencing, online discussion boards, and virtual simulations are all examples…" (pg. 45). Social work, particularly in distance learning institutions, had already adopted online instruction before the COVID-19 pandemic. In South Africa, however, more traditional universities, accustomed to traditional face-to-face instruction, began adopting online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Weeden & Cornwell, 2020).

Numerous studies have been conducted on social work education before the COVID-

19 pandemic, and some of the findings revealed that students within a classroom setting (face-to-face learning) were most likely to participate, ask questions, and were more willing to learn (Smoyer et al., 2020). On similar accounts, classroom learning presented an opportunity for students to interact with their peers and build relationships, which is a critical component of the training of students within the social work profession (Smoyer et al., 2020). Egan (2014) similarly emphasised how crucial relationship building is in social work, noting that it could be achieved through constant engagements tailored towards this skill. The constant engagements, through participation, questioning, and interactions, are further regarded as important elements of emancipatory education in social work, and they were traditionally facilitated effectively in face-to-face learning.

In addition to these concerns, scholars such as Forgey and Ortega-Williams (2016) have raised questions about the practicality of teaching social work online. They have argued that there has long been a belief that social work cannot be effectively taught through online platforms due to limitations of online education in meeting field work demands. Similarly, a study conducted in Botswana during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted concerns about learning social work online, particularly in relation to the impact this has on social work practicum and the challenges of the placement of students for the fieldwork during the lockdown. Placement of students is a crucial component of social work education, as it allows students to engage in praxis, which is essential in Applied Human Sciences (Mupedziswa et al., 2021). However, Mupedziswa et al., 2021 acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the already existing need for university and community partnerships, as the demand for student placements pushed for greater collaboration with communities.

Gad (2023) has expressed the possibility of social work being taught online given that online pedagogy is successfully implemented. He also noted that online learning, particularly through eLearning platforms, offered significant benefits to social work education. Gad

(2023) provides a conceptual framework for social work education that depicts an overview of the online learning pedagogy in the field. However, the rapid adoption of online learning in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns regarding the effectiveness of this transition (Weeden & Cornwell, 2020; Kajiita et al., 2020). Moreover, Conn (2004) argued that where there is a need for practical experience, online learning can lead to poor outcomes if the methodology of learning and content is not modified to accommodate a proactive pedagogical approach.

2.11. Social Work Education During COVID-19 Pandemic's Online Learning

Social work education needed significant adjustments after the outbreak of COVID-19, this affected both classroom instruction and fieldwork. A Study by Smoyer et al. (2020) in USA, using a 14-scale online survey with closed and opened ended questions, found that students disliked online classes and reported low retention of material learned. They also reported an inability to engage with the lecturer, such as asking questions and seeking clarification on module material (Smoyer et al., 2020). Additionally, students reported that online learning did not fulfil their need for interpersonal engagement and dialogues, which was what drew them to social work (Smoyer et al., 2020). These findings suggest that communication within online classes was limited. A Similar study conducted by Dube (2020) in South Africa highlighted that communication in online learning was constrained by challenges such as limited means of access (data restrictions), and electricity cuts.

It is further noted that during the COVID-19 online learning, social work education in South Africa involved synchronous and asynchronous learning. Perveen (2016) described synchronous learning as learning in real time- both lecture and students attend sessions simultaneously and participate in class proceedings. This approach can further be regarded as a hybrid system of learning as it often combines simultaneity with non-simultaneity as an

instructional design while both synchronous and asynchronous teaching may have altogether different patterns (Perveen, 2016). While synchronous learning allowed for real-time interaction, enabling students to ask questions and engage in their learning, it faced several challenges in South Africa. Structural issues, such as load shedding (electricity cuts), limited data access, limited resources, and low network bandwidth hindered the effectiveness of synchronous learning (Makhanya & Mfishi, 2023; Dube, 2020).

To mitigate the challenges, asynchronous learning was regarded as an alternative and supplementary strategy by institutions of higher learning. According to Perveen (2016), asynchronous online learning environments are not time bound, they allow for students to work on activities at their own pace – this is referred to as flexible learning or learning during convenience method. During the COVID-19 online pandemic, this method involved uploading pre-recorded lectures, slides, and other resources for students who were unable to attend live sessions.

Asynchronous learning has been reported to foster independence in learning because students can work through materials at their own speed, arguably engaging their thought processes in learning (Perveen, 2016). However, Freire (1970) critiqued this method as a 'banking system' approach, where students passively receive information without the opportunity to contribute their own views, thoughts, and opinions. This raises questions about the depth of student engagement and whether the method supports the development of critical thinking and active participation.

Both synchronous and asynchronous online learning pose serious challenges for the critical and emancipatory paradigm that social work education is grounded in, particularly in the South Africa context. Social work education has standards and requirements that are to be met by social work students, one of them being engagement in praxis (CHE, 2015, Sewpaul, 2013). The International Federation for Social Workers [IFSW] (2014) [critical paradigm],

emphasises that social work education should be inclusive of active participation, with students being active agents in their learning (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). Additionally, critical reflexivity is another important aspect in which social work education is rooted. In a country such as South Africa with a history of oppressive systems that attempted to uproot the citizens (Africans) to create instabilities, education should further be grounded on the visible role of Afrocentrism – another critical paradigm that is crucial for students within social work education. According to Asante (2016, pg. 234), Afrocentrism must play a role in the "choices, language, explanations, definitions, actions, and values" to genuinely re-centre personal, disciplinary, and societal praxis against the ideological traps of Western hegemony. As a requirement, the virtue and body of social work education should be advancing that narrative, to students and communities. It is unclear whether learning via online learning during COVID-19 in South Africa allowed for that advancement.

2.12. Conceptualisation of Variables and key terms in relation to Social Work Education

According to the IFSW (2014):

> *"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing."*

This definition highlights principal factors that should be central to social work education, such as theory and practice (praxis), social justice and human rights, and the importance of working with diverse populations. Working within a South African community that has been affected by oppressive systems (Odeyemi, 2021), social work students should be equipped

with skills for critical thinking, to move towards emancipation (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). Consistent with the above social work global definition, the South African Higher Education Act (1997) aims to regulate higher education through universities by the provision of restructured and transformed programs; redressing past discrimination and ensuring equal access; providing equal opportunities for learning and creating knowledge; and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in keeping with the international standards. Social workers can be a focal point for advancing the constitutional objectives of transformation [in economy, education, politics, and regulations] in addressing past injustices (Equality Report, 2018). The aim of the above-mentioned Act grounds social work education within a critical/transformed paradigm that is concerned with the issues of human emancipation (Asghar, 2013) and the consideration of social, cultural, economic, and political, histories of individuals in promoting human rights (Freire, 1970). However, the effectiveness of online learning in contributing to this aim or the global definition of social work remains uncertain.

Based on the above, social work education should focus on methods that promote praxis and facilitate engagement with key issues related to human rights, structural issues, social justice and power dynamics. According to Sakamoto & Pitner (2005), social workers should be wary of the issues of power in addressing emancipatory and anti-oppressive issues, and to achieve this, social workers should develop critical consciousness. Therefore, the education system should prepare and equip students with critical consciousness to achieve emancipation (Freire, 1970). According to Diemer et al. (2017), critical consciousness (dependent variable) represents the analysis of oppressed and previously disadvantaged populations, it further gathers their understanding of social conditions, inequality, and current affairs. This can be measured in two dimensions i.e., transformative consciousness (reflection on social realities/inequalities), and transformative action (the process of acting against those inequalities) (Diemer et al., 2017). In measuring critical consciousness, the following forms

should be considered: semi-intransitive consciousness; transitive consciousness; and critical transitive consciousness (Alajlan & Aljohani, 2021). Freire (1970) argued that achieving critical consciousness requires students to be involved as active participants in their learning, therefore, the adoption of epistemological dialogues/instruction (independent/mediate variable) is key. According to Skidmore (2006, pg.505):

> "*Dialogic instruction/epistemological dialogues will be supported by increased use of authentic, topic-relevant questions on the part of the teacher, but more fundamental is the quality of the interaction which surrounds those questions. What matters most is not simply the frequency of a particular exchange structure in classroom discourse, but how far students are treated as active epistemic agents, i.e., participants in the production of their knowledge"*

Scholars such as Makhanya and Zibane (2020), Sewpaul et al. (2011), and Sakamoto & Pitner (2005), support participatory education, reflective, relational learning, and the use of epistemological dialogues in social work to ensure that students develop critical consciousness. However, it remains unclear whether online learning, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowed for the use of dialogue instruction in social work education. Barbour et al. (2020) argued that incorporating online learning (independent variable) into the curriculum requires adequate planning time, designing, testing, and implementation. Whether the above-mentioned standards were met in the adoption of online learning in social work education in South Africa is questionable.

Based on the White Paper on higher education (1997) and the national plan on higher education (2001) various questions can be raised on the implementation of online learning i.e., how can equal access, transformation, and advancement of knowledge be achieved through online learning? It is worth noting that at the core of this study is emancipatory/ liberatory pedagogy which links with transformational objectives that emphasise the creation

of knowledge where students are the active agents (Higher Education Act, 1997). It sought to investigate the impact of online learning on emancipatory pedagogy in social work within higher institutions, with the aim to study the relationship between online learning, critical consciousness, and epistemological dialogues but also engage in an exploratory inquiry on the processes adopted during online learning and how it has impacted students' learning. These are key to the development of emancipation amongst students. There is a notable gap in research regarding how online learning contributed to students' emancipatory education. Thus, this study adopted Paulo Freire's theoretical concepts to gather data on this area.

2.13. Reviewed Literature in relation to Research Objectives

Numerous studies have been conducted comparing online learning and face-to-face learning, but they focus predominantly on the Western context. The quantitative studies conducted by Cummings et al. (2015), Siebert et al. (2006), and Coe and Elliot (1999), as detailed by Forgey and Ortega-Williams (2016), focused on exams score, low grades, course evaluation, perception of skills, and satisfaction between online and face-to-face students. The results reveal that there was no comparative difference between the groups in terms of learning outcomes. However, some early studies indicated that face-to-face learning had a positive contribution to students' marks (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016, Cummings et al., 2015). Despite this, Cummings et al. (2015) found that while traditional face-to-face students had higher scores in grades and average points, online students received higher field and rating competency scores. The results of the studies above allude to an important discussion regarding the understanding and adoption of online pedagogy, and the consideration of necessary steps and processes for its implementation. In studies conducted by Weeden and Cornwell, 2020; Kajiita et al., (2020) it is noted that the correct implementation processes of online learning in South Africa were not followed, rather online learning was rapidly adopted hence, its methodology and pedagogy were not adequately adapted.

The studies by Cummings et al. (2015) Siebert et al. (2006), and Coe and Elliot (1999) as detailed by Forgey, and Ortega-Williams (2016), did not observe the critical abilities of students between the students who learned online and students who learned face-to-face. A study conducted by Smoyer et al., (2020) revealed that there is significant literature that deliberated on the important components of emancipatory education which were evident and reported during the face-to-face classes. Assumptions held that the emancipatory education components in face-to-face learning contribute significantly to students' critical thinking. Based on the model developed by Norris and Ennis (1989) critical thinking skills have been understood to involve:

> *"Clarification – an ability to understand an issue based on various points of view; Assessment of evidence- which entails judging sources of information and making sound credible observations; Making and judging inferences- which is concerned with the inductive and deductive judgment of inference and making sound judgments supported by evidence; using appropriate strategies as tactics, vital for consideration is that, critical thinking is not mere following steps but careful consideration of strategies may be useful in guiding critical thinking" (cited in Bullen, 1998, para.16)*

This model, though not recent, gives an understanding of the characteristics that students trained to think critically should possess. For social work students, critical thinking is vital, especially as one of the central aims of social work emancipatory education is to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions and the hegemonic practices within societies (Giroux,1978). Hence, the international definition of social work locates the practice within a critically engaged paradigm.

Social work education aligns with emancipatory education at large in that there must be a predominant belief that education leads toward the liberation of the people and never their domestication (Freire, 1970). In this context, it may be crucial to assess the belief of

social work educators in the education they were rendering amidst the COVID-19 pandemic; to assess their perspectives about students' development of critical thinking and critical consciousness during online learning. While exploring these perspectives is not within the scope of this work, it is recognized as a significant area for further exploration that could contribute to the broader literature on emancipatory social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social work education has several elements of education that are crucial in ensuring that the goal of transforming education is not lost. The categorisation and assumption of education as perceived by Paulo Freire:

> *"For Freire, teaching and learning are human experiences with profound social consequences. Education is not reducible to a mechanical method of instruction. Learning is not a quantity of information to be memorized or a package of skills to be transferred to students. Classrooms die as intellectual centers when they become delivery systems for lifeless bodies of knowledge. Instead of transferring facts and skills from teacher to students, a Freirean class invites students to think critically about the subject matter, doctrines, the learning process itself, and their society"* (Shor, 2002, *pg.24).*

This quotation reveals a vital element from the standpoint of emancipatory education in social work and raises questions about the extent to which online learning, as implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, facilitated such an education. Hence, the primary focus of this work was to study the impact of online learning on the envisioned emancipatory social work education in South Africa. It sought to address the following objectives and research gaps:

Objective one: To determine the extent to which epistemological dialogues were utilised and establish how these were used during online learning in Social Work education.

Emancipatory pedagogy theory positions epistemological dialogues as a cornerstone in achieving critical consciousness (Freire, 2000). This theory emphasises active student participation as the foundation of learning, achieved through methods such as debates, dialogues, and discussions (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Skidmore, 2006). Similarly, Shantz (2015) argued that, within social work education, epistemological dialogues can be conceptualised as various forms of engagement, case study analysis, and other participatory methods. The author asserts that these methods are crucial for fostering critical consciousness, which is a core competency for social workers. Critical consciousness equips social workers to critically analyse power structures, social inequalities, and their impact on individuals and communities (Diemer et al., 2016). Through epistemological dialogues, students engage with diverse perspectives, challenge assumptions, and develop their ability to advocate for social justice (Diemer et al., 2016).

The use of epistemological dialogues results to creation of knowledge and meanings and is where learning occurs. However, dialogues are a more involved process in this knowledge creation. Epistemological dialogues are necessary for teaching and learning within social work education in order to meet the key competencies required for critical thinking in social work practice and for students to think on their feet to address pressing socio-economic issues (CHE, 2015). Throughout this study, the author has demonstrated how epistemological dialogues are crucial for the development of critical consciousness among students. This is not based on assumptions but on empirical evidence obtained in this study. As argued earlier by scholars such as Abrahams (2005), education should offer true dialogue in order to achieve critical consciousness.

Therefore, since learning occurs through the use of epistemological dialogues,

student should be taken through a process of unlearning, learning and (re)learning. Reflective learning became a pillar in this process. It is through reflective learning that students begin to engage in reflective practices, challenging the existing status quo. Gramsci coined this process as transforming "common sense" into "good sense," while Giroux viewed it as challenging the existing hegemonic practices. All of these are especially necessary in a country such as South Africa.

The author asserts that, due to historical disadvantages in South Africa stemming from oppressive systems, education through epistemological dialogues becomes a place of healing. This process involves recalling and reconceptualising historical events, making self-meaning, and beginning with self-reflection before engaging with communities. Reflective practices emphasise the importance of self-focus and introspection. Through this process, students move toward becoming 'complete' social work practitioners, though the term 'complete' is used advisedly, as learning is infinite. The author argues that engaging in epistemological dialogues enables students to develop core competencies in social work education. What makes a student truly competent is their curiosity, willingness to keep learning, challenging existing knowledge, and asking more questions than they answer – embracing lifelong learning. While, students become competent once they have acquired all the key competencies in social work, a key principle of lifespan development states that 'Development is lifelong' – a principle that applies equally to learning.

An early study conducted by Bullen (1998) found that numerous factors influenced participation and critical thinking, such as relevant course design, instructor interventions, content, and students' characteristics. These factors are important as they channel a discussion toward the use of epistemological dialogues within social work education and the development of critical consciousness. However, numerous studies have revealed that student face challenges in actively engaging and assuming ownership of their learning processes.

This is particularly concerning within the South African context, where there was inadequate planning for the online pedagogy, and materials used for contact-based learning were deposited on the eLearning platforms (Weeden & Cornwell, 2020; Kajiita, et al., 2020). Depositing information can be viewed as a significant barrier to the development of critical consciousness (Forgey, Ortega-Williams, 2016).

This study was concerned with whether online learning allowed the use of epistemological dialogues, given the documented challenges regarding online learning and its limits to participation and engagement (Makhanya & Mfishi, 2023; Smoyer et al., 2020; Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016). In a study conducted in USA by Forgey, and Ortega-Williams (2016), it was revealed that online learning hindered successful student interaction. In South Africa, there have been apparent challenges predicted to affect the full optimization of online learning. These include, by are not limited to, load shedding, network challenges, data issues, and the inability of academics to use online learning to its optimal function due to lack of training, and knowledge regarding the online pedagogy (Makhanya & Mfishi, 2023; Mncube et al., 2021 & Dube, 2020). Epistemological dialogues have been reported to play a significant role in the development of critical consciousness. However, the extent to which these were utilised, especially within the South African context where literature has documented numerous barriers to online teaching and learning remained unknown.

Objective Two: To determine the extent to which Social Work students developed critical consciousness (i.e., transformative consciousness and transformative action) and explore the impact of online learning on the development of critical consciousness.

According to South African Council for Social Services Professions (SACSSP), social work is a regulated profession comprising a body of scientific knowledge and competencies practiced by persons registered in terms of section 17 of the Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978. As documented by CHE (2015), social work education prepares student for the

applied competencies and skills required in the social work profession. CHE (2015) emphasised that social work, as an applied discipline, must balance theory and practice throughout the educational process. Applied competencies should, therefore, be grounded in a relevant conceptual framework and core knowledge requisites. This balance ensures that students are not only theoretically equipped but also practically capable of addressing real-world social issues. In addition, Simpson (2015) argued that social work education should allow students to internalise the values, interests, skills and knowledge of the profession. The author asserts that the development of critical consciousness lies at the core of social work values, skills and knowledge. To achieve this, the nature of the education student should engage in, becomes paramount.

As mentioned earlier, measuring critical consciousness involves considering various forms of awareness, as outlined by Alajlan and Aljohani (2021): semi-intransitive consciousness, transitive consciousness, and critical transitive consciousness. Each form represents a different level of engagement with social issues, ranging from basic awareness to active engagement in transformative action. This theoretical understanding provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the development of critical consciousness in social work students during COVID-19 pandemic.

Cummings et al., (2015, pg. 110) have offered the following critique regarding the use of online learning:

> *"Critics argue that Web-based approaches offer insufficient personal interaction and collaboration, both of which are vital to the development of essential interpersonal skills valued by the profession (social work) …online environments do not offer the same opportunity as traditional classroom settings for the dialogue, discussion, and debate necessary for authentic intellectual growth"*

This critique reveals the importance of debates, discussion, interaction, and engagement in social work education for the full development of students. These elements are documented as necessary and accelerate the development of critical thinking and awaken critical consciousness both of which are key to social work education. Classroom interactions and participation are known to contribute to the development of critical thinking among social work students. Mupedziswa et al. (2021) argued that a discipline such as social work requires a certain level of critical engagement. As previously asserted, South African societies are experiencing neo-colonialism, and it is therefore the mandate of trained social workers to challenge the status quo. However, it is argued that they can only exercise that when they have developed a higher level of consciousness – critical transitive consciousness (Alajlan & Aljohani, 2021). At that stage, they move toward transformative action, where they not only understand social issues and ills but can also challenge them (Alajlan & Aljohani, 2021). This study aimed to reveal whether online learning contributed to the development of critical consciousness in social work students, and establishing the extent of this development henceforth.

Objective Three: To investigate the mediating role of epistemological dialogues on the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness and establish how epistemological dialogues contributed towards critical consciousness during online learning in South Africa.

The use of epistemological dialogues within the classroom setting has been reported to significantly contribute to the development of critical consciousness among students (Cummings et al., 2015). The primary aim of this study was to establish a relationship exists between epistemological dialogues and the development of critical consciousness among social work students using online methods of teaching and learning in South Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic propelled institutions of higher learning, which were accustomed to

traditional face-to-face teaching and learning methods, to rapidly adopt online teaching and learning methods (Kajiita, et al., 2020; Weeden & Cornwell, 2020).

Critical consciousness is viewed as a transformational process because it has the power to change how we look at the world and how people are treated, thereby strengthening human interactions (Jamal, 2017; Diemer et al., 2017). It also enables individuals to challenge the oppressive political, social, and economic contradictions within societies, thus allowing for the liberation of the oppressors and the oppressed (Jamal, 2017; Diemer et al., 2017). Early scholars, such as Shor and Freire (1987), defined dialogues as ways to transform social relationships within the classroom setting. Dialogues are further understood as a collaborative activity between the teacher/lecturer and the students in the classroom, aiming to raise awareness about the society at large. This definition emphasises the important of addressing societal issues through dialogues.

Scholars such as Cummings et al. (2015), Sewpaul (2013), and Sewpaul et al. (2011) have argued that the use of dialogues in classrooms contributes to the development of critical thinking. Literature also documents dialectic arguments that detail the categorical relationship amongst these variables (critical consciousness and dialogues). However, there is limited analysis of the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness, particularly within social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study aimed to ascertain this relationship in the context of South African online learning while also assessing the mediating role of epistemological dialogues.

2.14. Legal and Policy Framework for Emancipatory Education

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (act 108 of 1996) ("The Constitution")

The chapter 2 of the South African Constitution (1996) provides for fundamental rights, including the right to basic education (s29); health (s27); and a state of emergency (s37). These constitutional provisions are crucial for this study, as South African universities should

uphold these rights section 29 (1) (a) and (b) guarantees the right to education, which should be made available and accessible to everyone (South African Constitution, 1996).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, universities implemented online learning as a necessary response to continue with the curriculum while upholding students' constitutional rights (Weeden & Cornwell, 2020). A concern, however, arose regarding the accessibility and availability of education, particularly for students from rural universities who often face additional challenges. It is evident that even within this research's site, a significant number of African students continued to enrol [n=29 667 in 2020; n=27 793 in 2021; n=37 498 in 2023] (Teaching & Learning (T&L), 2021; HEDA, 2024). These figures reveal drastic changes that have benefited students during post-apartheid in terms of access to higher education, but questions remain about students' access to learning opportunities during online learning. Given the challenges of the South African population, numerous scholars such as Makhanya and Mfishi (2023) and Dube (2020) have raised concerns about the accessibility of online learning content during the COVID-19 pandemic. Section 29 (2) (a) of the Constitution stipulates that education should promote equity and redress issues of the past (South African Constitution, 1996). Online learning has been identified as exclusionary and challenging to rural students (Mncube et al., 2021), which undermines equity and equality and further poses challenges to the planned transformation agenda within higher education. This exclusion poses concerns about the impact on students' knowledge development and the development of critical thinking skills, especially in applied professions such as social work. While the South African constitution provides for equal access to education, the implications of online learning must not be overlooked. The impact of the online system on students' access to content, knowledge, and critical consciousness remained unknown, particularly for social work Students in higher learning institutions.

The Council for higher education (CHE) Social Work Standard document and the South African Council for Social Services Profession (SACSSP)

The CHE and SACSSP document core standards for social work education in South Africa. According to the CHE (2015), the historical background of social work in South Africa played a key role in shaping social work education standards. Social work education has always maintained a radical and emancipatory stance toward societal issues (CHE, 2015). SACSSP (2020) stipulates that social work programs should promote independence and reflective learning. Reflective learning forms an important part of emancipation theory, as it allows individuals to critically reflect on history in the current context (Freire, 1970). However, it was unclear how reflective learning was incorporated into social work education during online learning. Skidmore (2006) acknowledged that dialogues, which are part of reflective learning, are critical in developing critical consciousness. Furthermore, CHE (2015) emphasised that social workers should always respond to contextual issues, but this should not disregard the history of the communities they serve. It is for this reason that critical reflection is not only important but necessary for social work students. However, it remained to be seen whether online learning facilitated the use of reflective learning on lived experiences.

White Paper on Social Welfare (1997)

The White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) is one of the important policies guiding social work in South Africa. This policy focuses social work services on principles such as equal participation, democracy, social justice, and non-discrimination (White Paper on Social Welfare, 1997). Social work is therefore a valuable tool for attaining and achieving transformed constitutional objectives (Equality Report, 2018). The principle outlined in the White Paper place social work education within an emancipatory framework with a specific emphasis on addressing past disparities. This process requires critical reflection on past

systems to avoid reproducing past oppression in social work and social welfare services (White Paper on Social Welfare, 1997).

Freire (1970) argued that political issues form a key component of the lives of people, hence advocacy is a crucial aspect for social workers working within South African societies (Casimir & Samuel, 2013). It is when students are equipped with emancipatory knowledge that they form a vehicle for the envisioned principles, especially when working within a society that has been shaped by oppressive systems (Odeyemi, 2021). Engaging with such knowledge contributes to human and societal emancipation, which is essential for South Africa.

2.15. Conclusion

This chapter revealed that there is a clear need for research that is grounded in an emancipatory framework and theory in social work education. It began by providing a history of South Africa and its oppressive systems and their ongoing implications t. This reflection grounded social work in history, noted the importance of history within social work and how this can be used as a learning point and a reference point to assist communities. This chapter also provided a critical analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on universities and social work students and provided a reflective analysis of social work education before and during the COVID-19 pandemic focusing on online learning, epistemological dialogues and development of critical consciousness – key variables in this study. The literature related to the objectives of this study was reviewed identifying and narrowing the focus areas of this research. Lastly, this chapter introduced legislative and policy aspects which are relevant to this study. The discussion, analysis, and critical reflection in this chapter are grounded within the emancipatory pedagogy theoretical lens.

Chapter Three

Theory

3.1. Introduction

The foundation of any research project rests upon a theory, which provides a comprehensive framework for the study. A theory elucidates the relationship between variables and constructs (Neuman, 2014). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018) a theory can be understood as an interconnected set of ideas that serves for multiple purposes, such as shaping the conceptualisation of the study, explaining relationships among variables or concepts, and guiding the analysis and interpretation of findings. One pivotal function of a theory, as noted by Terre Blanche et al. (2006), is to link the overarching objectives and focus of the research with the theoretical framework underpinning it. This linkage must also consider the research's contextual setting. In this study, the theory assisted in refining the research tools and grounding the study within the South African higher education context. This included considering the broader conceptual framework of the study, the research environment, and the processes of data collection and analysis.

In this study, the Emancipatory Pedagogy, also known as liberatory Pedagogy, pioneered by Paulo Freire (1970), serves as the adopted theoretical framework. The variables and concepts investigated and analysed in this research draw inspiration from Freire's seminal work, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," with additional insights from scholars within the critical paradigm. This chapter outlines and discusses the historical context of the theory, its previous use, its fundamental principles as theoretical propositions, its relevance to the present study, as well as the critiques and limitations associated with it. Ultimately, this chapter aims to demonstrate how the theory has been used in the present study.

3.2. Background of the theory

As mentioned above, the emancipatory pedagogy theory is deeply rooted in the work of Freire (1970), specifically "pedagogy of the oppressed". While Freire's work initially targeted literacy programs in Brazil, it gained prominence in academia and was supported by the rise of critical theories (Nouri & Sajjadi, 2014). As such, Freire (1970) is regarded as the father of emancipatory pedagogy. Emancipatory pedagogy "is founded on the notion that education should play a fundamental role in creating a just and democratic society" (Nouri & Sajjadi, 2014, pg. 76). Freire (1970) viewed education as a tool to enable teachers to encourage critical reflections on social and historical issues and circumstances, thus promoting collaborative learning based on critical thinking. He further acknowledged the objective social reality, which should be studied (Freire, 1970). This same background forms the basis to which this study is rooted within in understanding emancipatory education during online learning in South Africa.

According to Abrahams (2005), the emancipatory pedagogy theory is based on the following principles: education broadens the student's view of reality; education is transformative; education is political. education is empowering; and education is based on true dialogue. Paulo Freire's work laid the foundation for the work of Shore, Giroux and McLaren on critical pedagogy, which is grounded in praxis. Critical theory managed to "pose an important counter logic to the positivistic, ahistorical, de-politicised discourse that often informs modes of analysis employed by liberal and conservative critics of schooling" (Giroux & McLaren, 2002, pg.29). These principles are believed to inform social work education, which the IFSW (2014) describes as being located within a critical paradigm. Brookfield (2017) and Sewpaul et al. (2011) acknowledged the importance of relational learning in social work education, which should equip students with the skills necessary to challenge injustices. In the literature chapter, a critical reflection of how the apartheid political system

contributed to social work education is provided, it is for this reason that social work education should be concerned with analysis and understanding of politics. The establishment of emancipatory education has shaped teaching and learning in higher education in many ways. Furthermore, discussions of politics, transformational objectives, use of dialogues, and the analysis of social reality also shape social work education. Thus, this study was grounded in the lens of emancipatory pedagogy to understand the impact of online learning during COVID-19 pandemic on the envisioned emancipatory social work education.

In addition to the above, "Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information" (Freire, 1970, pg.79). Freire's concept of liberating education involves the application of student cognitive facilities to thinking that freed oneself from oppression, whether economic, cultural, political or other forms within society. Therefore, the development of critical consciousness becomes paramount, especially in students within Applied Human Science disciplines such as social work. In alignment with the principles of emancipatory pedagogy and critical paradigms in social work education, it is crucial to recognise that liberating education, as emphasised by Freire, goes beyond the mere transfer of information. It involves engaging students in cognitive acts that lead to the liberation of their minds from various forms of oppression within society, be it economic, cultural, or political. This notion highlights the importance of nurturing critical consciousness in students, especially in a historical disadvantaged country. Hence, this study embraces this concept and situates itself within the framework of emancipatory pedagogy where, discussions of politics, transformational objectives, the use of dialogues, and the analysis of reality play a central role in shaping the educational experience of students.

3.3. Use of Emancipatory Pedagogy in Other Research Studies

As noted above, emancipatory pedagogy set the ground and basis of arguments for critical theorists such as Shore, Giroux, and McLaren. Developed primarily for education or learning, the Emancipatory pedagogy theory is mostly used in educational contexts to guide teachers' interactions with students. In South Africa, this theory is not limited to primary and secondary education, but has also been applied in higher education, extending beyond teachers to include lecturers and leaders in social education classes. The research conducted in these areas focuses on how teachers incorporate the Freirean concepts into their practices. However, the influence of this pedagogy has also extended to political science, economics, and policy formation. Additionally, it has been incorporated into social work education. Given that is rooted in a critical paradigm, scholars such as Sewpaul et al. (2011) and Sakamoto, and Pitner (2005) have adopted this pedagogy to study the nature of social work education and analyse social dynamics.

Due to the broad applicability of this theory across disciplines, it has also found a place in music-related disciples. This expand the scope of the argument for emancipatory pedagogy's relevance, demonstrating its utility across various disciplines beyond education. For example, in the work conducted by Abrahams (2005), theoretical concepts of emancipatory pedagogy theoretical such as critical consciousness, experiential learning and praxis and education as a transformational process that leads to the liberation of both students and teachers were explored and discussed. The paper proposed the concept of 'critical pedagogy for music education (CPME),' connecting critical pedagogy to music education.

In a different study conducted by Omodan (2022) in South Africa, the use of emancipatory pedagogy was assessed in the context of democratic classrooms. In this study, the emancipatory pedagogy theory was adopted for its ability to "promote critical thinking and social justice among students, develop a personal connection with learning and creating

an atmosphere for freedom of knowledge construction among students" (Omodan, 2022, pg. 348). Here, emancipatory pedagogy is depicted as a critical theory that allows students to develop not just value-free knowledge but knowledge grounded in their ability to promote social justice and challenge social injustices in political or economic spheres. This can be attributed to the critical thinking skills that emerge from using emancipatory pedagogy. One recommendation from this study was that education should adopt principles of emancipatory pedagogy to promote learning that will develop students' critical thinking skills and freedom to be creators of knowledge (Omodan, 2022).

A similar study conducted by Flem et al. (2021), explored the use of emancipatory praxis. This approach involved engaging students in identifying the underlying sources of advantages or privilege. The study focused on the written and oral reports of undergraduate social work students at a Norwegian university who participated in a teaching session on critical reflexivity. The findings demonstrated the effectiveness of emancipatory praxis in raising awareness about intersecting social factors such as nationality, race, gender, religion, and sexuality that either create barriers or facilitate access to power, status, and resources.

The work of Paulo Freire has also been applied across various theories. For instance, AU (2007) argued that there have been increased debates on the Marxism of the theory, suggesting that Freire was influenced largely by the Marxist theory. However, this has been the subject of debates and arguments within academia. Other scholars, such as Salazar (2013), argued that Freire was influenced largely by Christian humanism. The cross-disciplinary applicability and relevance of the theory should be viewed as an achievement of the theory to spark interest, arguments and contribute to knowledge creation grounded in diverse perspectives.

In his study, Salazar (2013), asserted that most native blacks view themselves as less human due to the dominance of 'whiteness' within the American context. This view associate

blackness with being primitive, uncultured, uncivilised or bad and whiteness with good and superior (Oliver, 2024). Similarly, in a study conducted by Sewpaul (2013) titled "Inscribed in Our Bloods," this notion of whiteness as good and superior is assessed within the South African context. Sewpaul (2013) observed how her children viewed race, and how media and politics reinforced the dominant narrative. The researcher's account of race and internalised oppression in South Africa is affiliated with the accounts that the majority of individuals as children often stated that they wanted to be white when they grew up as if being black was reversible. This, therefore, illustrates the need for emancipatory pedagogy as an approach to address the inferiority complex perpetuated by oppressive systems (Sewpaul, 2013; Biko, 1987; Freire, 1970).

3.4. The Proposition of Emancipatory Pedagogy Theory

Theories are built upon foundational concepts that help explain, and understand the phenomenon under study. While emancipatory pedagogy has no clear assumption or preposition, this study identifies the main ideas of Paulo Freire and uses them to ground/guide this inquiry. The work of Dale & Hyslop-Margison (2010) further informs the prepositions of the emancipatory pedagogy theory. Freire's central idea on emancipatory pedagogy was that education should be transformative, a notion rooted in the struggles that students encounter whether historically or currently due to oppressive structures in societies (Friere, 1970). The main focus of the emancipatory pedagogy theory, therefore, is on humanising society through education, creating a space where students are critical thinkers, and rejecting the banking model of education (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). This study adopted humanisation; critical conscientisation; rejection of the banking system of knowledge and the use of epistemological dialogues as theoretical propositions and building blocks on which the analysis is grounded.

The adoption of the above key concepts from Paulo Freire's work serves as a valuable guide for social work education in South Africa. Given the country's complex history, marked by apartheid and its ongoing effects, there is an urgent need for pedagogical approaches that not only impart knowledge but also foster a deep understanding of social justice, equity, and human rights (Amin et al., 2016). The emphasis on humanisation and critical conscientisation aligns with the broader goals of social work in the country, which often involves working with marginalised and vulnerable populations. It is crucial to note that by developing critical thinking and a commitment to social change among social work students, this approach prepares them to address the multifaceted challenges and systemic injustices prevalent in South African society. It encourages students to become advocates for transformative change.

Humanisation

Humanisation posits that educators should assist students in finding freedom from injustices, inequalities, and racism and break away from the image of the oppressor (Freire, 1970). According to Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2010, pg. 73), "Humanising education requires creating a particular learning milieu that includes a broad-based respect for students, for their pre-existing knowledge, and their agency". Humanisation is further said to encompass interactions that enable both students and teachers to develop a critically conscious understanding of their relationship with the world. This critical consciousness enables students and teachers to become subjects, consciously aware of their context and condition as human beings (AU, 2007). On one hand, humanisation is viewed as the process of becoming more fully human social, historical, thinking, communicative, transformative, and creative persons who participate in and engage with the world (Salazar, 2013; Freire, 1970). Here it is clear that human beings, when grounded within the emancipatory pedagogy and humanisation, continue to engage themselves in the process of becoming.

In addition, humanisation represents the practice of freedom where the oppressed are liberated through consciousness from oppression, and self-determination becomes a possibility (Freire, 1970). It is worth noting that humanisation cannot be imposed; it can only occur by engaging the oppressed in their own liberation (Salazar, 2013; Freire, 1970). A key question this study raises is whether social work education, in the context of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowed students to fully engage themselves in the process of becoming while learning online. To explore any student-centred phenomenon, students' experiences and how they are affected by these must be put at the centre of inquiry.

In the context of social work education in South Africa, the challenge of maintaining humanisation and critical consciousness in online learning is particularly significant. South Africa's history of apartheid and the ongoing socio-economic disparities emphasise the need for social work graduates who are deeply connected to the communities they serve and equipped to address complex social issues. The transition to online learning, though necessary for safety during the pandemic, raises questions about whether it can provide the same level of humanisation and transformative experience as in-person learning. Social work is fundamentally about human interactions, empathy, and understanding (Egan, 2014), which can be more challenging to convey in online environments. Therefore, the success of online social work education in South Africa depends on the ability to preserve humanisation, encourage critical consciousness, and create an inclusive and transformative online learning environment that remains deeply connected to the realities of the people.

Critical conscientisation

Diemer et al. (2016) describes critical consciousness as the ability to perceive contradictions in political, social and economic spheres and take actions against them. In addition, it places dialogue within the social injustice, inequality, sexism and social division contradictions. Critical conscientisation is, therefore, a transformation power, as its ability is not only limited

to the liberation of the oppressed but also that of the oppressor, to be able to critically analyse and challenge any injustice (Diemer et al., 2016). Critical conscientisation, as a theoretical principle, moves beyond the classroom as a mere space for learning theory, to encompass broader sociological implications in education (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). This process requires students to not only learn about sociological implications such as injustices, racism, and inequality but also to develop a critical thinking ability and adopt a stance contrary to the overly adopted i.e., a taken-for-granted assumption. Gramsci (1971) conceptualised this process as transforming "common sense" into "good sense".

Critical consciousness has two components that are measured in this study: Transformative consciousness; and transformative action. According to Diemer et al. (2017) transformative consciousness involves critically reflecting on inequalities and social injustices, while transformative action involves collective action against these injustices. Challenging social inequalities and injustices is a fundamental value of social work education, which aims to transform students' mindset towards critical reflection and action.

For this study and the paradigm in which it is grounded, it was important to conceptualise and operationalise transformative consciousness and transformative action. These concepts are viewed as involving critical processes and reflections, and are expanded into transformative critical consciousness and transformative critical action. The belief is that it is not enough to simply possess knowledge; it should be scrutinised (transformative critical consciousness). Furthermore, it is not enough to possess critical/ scrutinised knowledge without critical action to combat social injustices and inequalities. Critical reflection/process, in this context, involves critical analysis as well as promoting egalitarianism, while critical action entails participating in socio-political, economic, and cultural activities as individuals or collective to bring social change (Diemer et al., 2017). Jemal (2017) asserts that these two are the highest forms of consciousness that individuals can achieve. Therefore, measuring

them was vital, especially in online social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa.

In South Africa, where historical legacies of Apartheid and ongoing disparities continue to perpetuate social injustices and inequalities, the application of critical reflection and action is particularly crucial (Odeyemi, 2021). Chapter 2 of this study indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues, emphasising the urgency for social work education to equip students with the tools and mindset necessary to address complex and evolving societal challenges. As online learning became the norm during the pandemic, the need for adaptable and inclusive pedagogical approaches to instil critical consciousness became apparent, but was there any flexibility during online learning to facilitate the development of critical consciousness? To answer this question, the researcher challenges the reader to reflect on the critical questions surrounding the adoption of online learning in South African universities and the 'inclusion' of its pedagogy.

The study further asserts that the integration of critical reflection and action into the curriculum can empower future social workers to be change agents who not only understand the root causes of inequality but also actively engage in dismantling the structural barriers that sustain it. Therefore, academic institutions must recognise the transformative potential of critical education, fostering a generation of socially conscious individuals committed to creating a more just and equal society. This study focused on gathering data on this crucial aspect of social work education.

Rejection of the banking system of Education

One of the main propositions of emancipatory pedagogy is the rejection of the banking system of knowledge as a means to transform education. Freire (1970) rejected the notion of best-practice and technocratic approaches, proposing instead content-focused education that is fundamental for students' learning (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). This critique

challenges the uniform method of education that views teachers as experts and discourages participatory modes of teaching and learning. The banking system of knowledge undermines a student's creative power and serves the interest of the oppressor be it policymakers, curriculum developers, or the elite (Freire, 1970). The banking model of education is regarded as a top-down approach that weakens the learning relationship between the teacher and the student. The characteristics of following the banking model of education are outlined below (Nouri & Sajjadi, 2014, pg. 80; Freire, 1970, pg.73):

> *" (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught; (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about; (d) the teacher talks and the students listen; (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined; (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply; (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher; (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it; (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students; (j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects."*

The above clearly shows that students are seen as passive recipients in their learning, undermining the value of education. It was in the interest of this study to investigate and explore whether students in the university, especially in Applied Science disciplines such as social work, were passive in their learning during the COVID-19 pandemic's online learning. Social work education operates within a critical paradigm, where students' histories are valued in learning as they bring in a reflection of the social context (Sewpaul et al., 2011); Skidmore, 2006). The banking system approach is at the centre of analysis, as it reflects the ability of students to develop critical consciousness and proposes the use of epistemological

dialogues in learning as an alternative. Reflection on whether students were viewed as subjects or objects in the online mode of teaching and learning adopted during COVID-19 is vital.

In social work education, this inquiry holds particular significance. Social work is an applied profession, where students need to not only acquire knowledge but also develop a deep understanding of the complexities and nuances of societal issues (CHE, 2015; IFSW, 2014). Kadushin and Harkness (2014) asserted that social work education requires students to be active agents who engage critically with the social realities they are destined to address in their future careers. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift to online learning, this examination becomes even more critical. The sudden transition challenged educators to adapt their teaching methods and maintain the essence of social work education, which thrives on personal connections, empathy, and critical thinking (Sewpaul et al., 2011; Egan, 2014). This study's focus on whether students were regarded as subjects or objects in this new educational landscape explores the very heart of this pedagogical approach within the discipline, raising vital questions about the effectiveness of online education in preserving the core values and principles of social work while nurturing active, critically conscious students.

Use of epistemological dialogues

Within the emancipatory pedagogy, students must engage in dialogues, with teachers or lecturers also being participants in this model of education (Nouri & Sajjadi, 2014). This is important in inviting both students and teachers to think critically about their social conditions (Nouri & Sajjadi, 2014). As a result, students are not passive but active agents in learning. It is important to conceptualise the epistemological dialogues to give a deeper insight into how they were used in this study. According to McLaren (2015); Freire (1970), epistemological dialogues within emancipatory pedagogy involve conversations and

interactions within an educational context that advocate for critical thinking, social justice, and the scrutiny of prevailing norms and power dynamics. These dialogues help students examine and challenge the processes through which society creates, manages, and disseminates knowledge (Kincheloe et al., 2018).

One article titled “Decolonialisation is not a Metaphor,” unpacks the value of challenging structures; the authors argued that by questioning dominant narratives and ideologies, learners are encouraged to explore and deconstruct the construction, control, and distribution of knowledge in society (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The authors maintain that these conversations foster a more comprehensive and equitable comprehension of the world, promoting inclusivity and challenging established beliefs and power structures (Tuck & Yang, 2012). In a social work classroom, for example, students may engage in dialogues that encourage them to explore how social services and welfare policies have historically perpetuated inequality and marginalised certain populations (Healy & Thomas, 2020). Through these dialogues, students are motivated to critically analyse the distribution of resources and the underlying power structures that shape social work practice (Dominelli, 2017). However, as noted in the literature chapter of this research, the inclusion of epistemological dialogues in online learning has been a subject of debate. Online learning in social work education has presented limitations, such as reduced real-time interaction, the digital divide, and challenges in building trust, all of which can hinder the facilitation of deep, transformative dialogues essential for emancipatory pedagogy (Makhanya & Mfishi, 2023; Hlatshwayo, 2021).

Freire (1970) emphasized the importance of epistemological dialogues in education, acknowledging the participatory and critical nature necessary for educational reform. Freire’s (1970) views are based on collectiveness and cohesion, which should be evident in the teacher-student relationship. Scholar such as Bovill (2020), describe teaching and learning as

a relational process, where there is a collaboration between teachers and students. In this process, students engage in dialogues and debates, learning from and challenging their historical realities (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). In this study, the epistemological dialogues encompass debates, dialogues, discussions, participation, questioning and feedback, reflection, critical reviews, analyses of visual aids such as videos, critical application of theory and practice, and collaborative learning. However, as the researcher probes further into epistemological dialogues and participatory learning, it is crucial to maintain a critical perspective. While these methods can be highly effective in fostering critical thinking and active engagement, they are not without challenges.

The successful implementation of epistemological dialogues requires skilled facilitation (Brookfield, 2017), and in the context of online learning, ensuring meaningful and inclusive participation can be a complex endeavour. Not all students may be equally comfortable or adept at participating in such dialogues, which could lead to disparities in engagement and learning outcomes (Freeman et al., 2014). Educators must strike a balance between promoting active participation and providing support for those who may struggle in this mode of learning. Furthermore, as dialogues are centred on questioning, challenging, and critically analysing, they should be conducted respectfully and inclusively, considering the diversity of perspectives and experiences that students bring into the discussion. Ultimately, fostering epistemological dialogues in social work education necessitates a thoughtful and reflective approach, ensuring that it enhances, rather than hinders, the transformative ability of the learning process. Therefore, it was imperative to establish whether these dialogues were used and how they were used during online learning in social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic within the South African context.

3.5. Theoretical Model Depicting Relationships Amongst the Variables in the Study

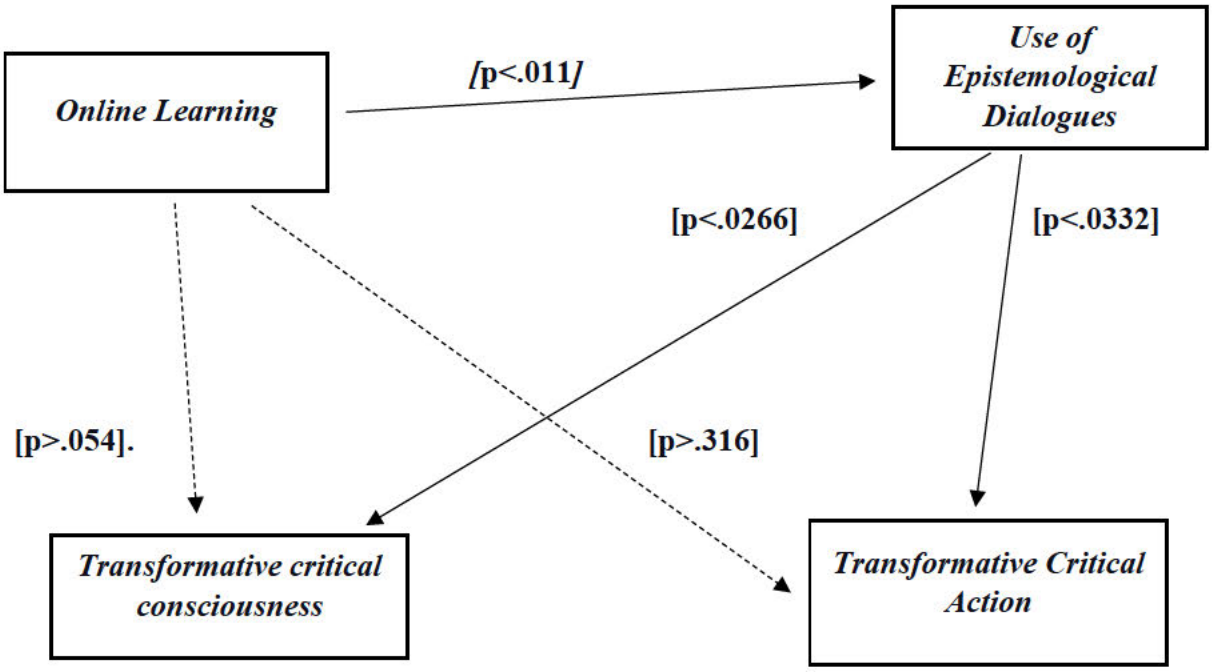


Figure 1: Theoretical Model: The above model illustrates the correlation among variables in the study. There is a significant relationship between online learning and the use of epistemological dialogues, the use of epistemological dialogues and the development of critical consciousness (TCC & TCA). However, the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness (TCC & TCA) is insignificant.

As outlined in the emancipatory pedagogy theory, the interplay of online learning, epistemological dialogues, and the development of critical consciousness constitutes a complex and significant dynamic. Drawing from the foundational works of Paulo Freire (1970) and Bell Hooks (1994), who emphasised the role of dialogical education and critical consciousness in liberatory learning, it is evident that a profound connection exists between these variables. The use of epistemological dialogues, as emphasised by Freire and Hooks, is

instrumental in fostering critical consciousness, which is a fundamental component of transformative education. Furthermore, as Brookfield (2017) argued, the incorporation of critical theory in teaching and learning practices catalyses the development of critical consciousness.

However, the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness remains complex. While online learning platforms provide opportunities for critical dialogues and consciousness development, the insignificant relationship observed accentuated the need for further exploration within the context of emancipatory pedagogy and online learning in South African universities, qualitative findings suggest that the quality of dialogues and participation was questionable. Kincheloe et al. (2018) noted that contemporary discussions on critical pedagogy continue to evolve, and understanding the specific dynamics of these relationships is crucial for advancing the principles of emancipatory pedagogy in the digital age.

3.6. Relevance of the theory

The theory was fundamental to the formation of the study. The major concepts and variables in the study are derived from this theory, which situated the researcher's thinking within the critical paradigm. As such, it was integral to the paradigm adopted for this study. Additionally, the theory played a crucial role in the formation of the objective and hypothesis tested, and it was instrumental in the development of the scales used. It grounded the analysis within critical perspectives, making it vital for examining the study's findings and results. Below is a detailed account of how the theory was used and its relevance in this study and context.

It is essential to note that the emancipatory pedagogy theory provided a comprehensive framework that deeply resonates with the variables examined in this study i.e.

online learning, use of epistemological dialogues, and the development of critical consciousness. As Freire (1970) asserted, the core tenet of emancipatory pedagogy is the development of critical consciousness, which calls for students to transcend passive acceptance and engage in critical analysis of the sociocultural, political, and economic forces shaping their world. The study's identification of a significant relationship between epistemological dialogues and the development of critical consciousness aligns seamlessly with this fundamental principle, as dialogic processes enable students to question, reflect, and critique prevailing norms. This is particularly important and of value in the context of social work education.

The emancipatory pedagogy theory's emphasis on dialogue and active participation finds resonance in this study's exploration of online learning as a platform for learning and dialogue. This theory stresses the importance of open communication and meaningful discussions as catalysts for critical thinking and personal growth. However, the study's revelation of an insignificant relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness suggests the need for a more critical examination of online education's design and implementation. This is necessary to ensure that online learning aligns with the principles of emancipatory pedagogy, particularly in terms of ensuring empowerment and social change.

This study also notes that social work education, traditionally reliant on face-to-face interactions, was significantly impacted by the pandemic's restrictions on in-person gatherings and the closure of educational institutions. The transition to online learning became a necessity, highlighting the importance of exploring the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness, a core objective of social work education. The insignificant relationship between online learning and critical consciousness

raises critical questions about how the principles of emancipatory pedagogy can be effectively translated into online social work education.

In this regard, the study's reference to "Transformative Critical Action" as one of the variables and adopted concepts emphasises the importance of moving beyond mere critical awareness to the realm of action and social transformation. Emancipatory pedagogy, as elaborated by Giroux (2011), is inherently concerned with empowering students to not only understand the critical issues at hand but to translate that understanding into proactive steps for positive societal change. The pandemic further amplified social issues, including inequality, poverty, and mental health challenges, areas where social workers are uniquely positioned to make a difference. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, social work education needed to equip students not only with critical awareness but also with the tools and motivation to drive transformative changes in their communities. Therefore, the study's insights into the variables of online learning, epistemological dialogues, and the development of critical consciousness are meaningfully framed within the emancipatory pedagogy theory, which seeks to not only educate but also empower social work students to be active agents of change in an ever-evolving digital world.

This study argues that the enduring influence of Paulo Freire's work on emancipatory pedagogy is a testament to the power of his ideas in shaping progressive educational thought. In the South African context, especially considering its complex history, Freire's approach resonates deeply. South Africa's transition from Apartheid to democracy highlights the importance of education in addressing historical injustices and contributing to a just and equitable society. Embracing Freire's vision of education as a tool for critical reflection and collaborative learning is especially relevant in the South African context, where transformative education is crucial. This study contends that grounding social work education in emancipatory pedagogy can play a pivotal role in producing socially conscious and

empathetic social work graduates who are well-equipped to address the multifaceted challenges faced by the nation's diverse communities. This approach aligns with the broader goals of social work, which aim to advocate for the marginalized, address inequality, and promote social justice (IFSW, 2014). It is a powerful tool for societal transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

3.7. Limitations and Critiques of the Theory

Every theory has its critiques and these critiques are essential for the theory's further advancement. The emancipatory pedagogy is no exception and has faced criticism since its inception. Some early critics viewed students as having the potential to think independently of context. Firth (1996) challenged the 'illusion' of emancipatory pedagogy, noting the difficulties in the need for curriculum change and the applicability of emancipatory pedagogy in certain fields, such as environmental education. It is important to note that this work by Firth was based on the assessment of the context of South Africa just after the end of Apartheid, and many of the concerns raised at that time have changed significantly today.

In addition, there have been concerns about the perceived idealism of the theory. Scholars such as Aronowitz & Giroux (1991) argued that emancipatory pedagogy's ideals may seem disconnected from the practical demands of educational systems. In practice, adhering to the principles of critical dialogue, empowerment, and social change can be challenging within the constraints of standardised education. This can manifest as a tension between achieving standardised learning outcomes and implementing the more open, dialogic, and transformative approach that emancipatory pedagogy promotes (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Moreover, the contextual relevance of emancipatory pedagogy can vary significantly, introducing another layer of critique. Critics argue that its applicability may not be universal, especially in contexts where extreme disparities in resources, political

oppression, or cultural differences exist (Firth, 1996). Implementing emancipatory pedagogy in such settings can be particularly challenging, as the deep inequalities and the social and economic barriers may hinder the attainment of its goals.

Another critique of the emancipatory pedagogy theory is its lack of clear, practical guidance for educators. Some early scholars, such as Habermas (1971), pointed out that while the theory champions critical thinking and dialogue, it does not provide educators with specific, actionable strategies for effective classroom implementation. This gap in practical guidance leaves educators unsure about how to effectively translate emancipatory pedagogy's ideals into their teaching practices (Habermas, 1971). Critics have also raised concerns about the potential for a one-size-fits-all approach inherent in emancipatory pedagogy (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). They argued that this pedagogy may not fully account for individual learner differences, possibly overlooking the importance of addressing diverse learners needs. The perceived prescriptiveness of certain methods and concepts in emancipatory pedagogy may limit its adaptability to the unique needs and preferences of learners (Freire, 1970).

Also, the ongoing critiques of emancipatory pedagogy highlights the dynamic nature of educational theories. A limitation often noted is that the theory focuses only on school-based curriculum and learning contexts, which limits its broader applicability. It is for this reason that being adaptive to these critiques in the context of social work education is important. This study argues that these lead to a deeper understanding of the theory's applicability within South African higher education, considering its unique socioeconomic, political and cultural dimensions. Scholars such as Stanczyk (2021) acknowledged that while emancipatory pedagogy has limitation, it also has material substance in Africa. This study contends that it can contribute significantly to teaching and learning, positioning students within this understanding. Learning and rectifying critiques when implementing emancipatory pedagogy can lead to transformative social work education. The theory's

ability to prepare students to navigate the complex realities of the country is crucial. While the emancipatory pedagogy theory is a strong educational theory that fosters the development of critical consciousness among students, it is evident that it is not without its critiques and limitations. The idealistic nature of the theory, challenges in different contextual settings, lack of practical guidance, and prescriptiveness are all aspects that merit thoughtful consideration. Despite these critiques, many educators or lecturers continue to find value in emancipatory pedagogy and its ability to create more equitable, dialogic, and empowering learning environments.

3.8. Conclusion

This chapter primarily drew upon Freire's work, but it also acknowledged significant contributions from scholars within the critical paradigm. It outlined and discussed the background of the emancipatory pedagogy theory, its previous adoption by other researchers, its foundational principles (which are adopted as prepositions for this study), its relevance to the current study, as well as its critiques and limitations. The chapter aimed to illustrate how the theory had been used in the development of this study, and how it guided the understanding of and subsequently underpinned the analysis of results.

Chapter Four

Methodology

4.1. Introduction

A study investigating and exploring how changes in teaching and learning impact students requires a methodology that comprehensively addresses students' experiences with learning, particularly within historically disadvantaged contexts. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a research methodology is viewed as a way to systematically solve a research problem. It outlines steps on how empirical scientific research is conducted. This chapter discusses the steps, techniques, processes, and procedures employed in this study to answer the questions of what, how, why, where, who, and when the study was conducted.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the research paradigm adopted in this study, focusing on the theoretical underpinnings of the paradigm and how it was applied throughout the research process. It then covers the research design, population, and sampling strategies used. Next, it discusses data management and analysis, followed by data integration. The chapter also covers the reliability, validity, and trustworthiness of the research, highlighting triangulation. The research ethics, including the standards of conduct for the researcher, are discussed. Lastly, the chapter discusses the study's limitations and concludes by providing a summary of this chapter. It is worth noting that this chapter is grounded within a mixed-methods research process. The aim is to detail the mixed methods processes adopted in this study and relate them to its design.

4.2. Research Paradigm

Chilisa and Kawulich (2012) define a research paradigm as a worldview within a discipline that guides how problems are solved. Creswell and Creswell (2018) expand on this, describing a research paradigm as both a worldview, and a basic set of beliefs or assumptions

that guide a research inquiry. Furthermore, Chilisa and Kawulich (2012) assert that a paradigm is informed by social reality (ontology), the nature of reality (epistemology), ethics, and value system (axiology), all of which inform a systematic inquiry (methodology). These definitions emphasise that research is not a neutral process, but one influenced by the researcher's background, knowledge, values, and set of ideas about how the research should be conducted.

This study adopted a multiple-paradigm approach. As Hall (2013, pg.2) notes, "Existing single paradigms do not provide an adequate rationale for mixed methods research," which is why this study adopted a multiple paradigm approach. A Multiple-paradigm approach is used when a researcher draws from more than one paradigm in their research (Hall, 2013). While critics argue that using multiple paradigms in one study can lead to incompatibility (Hall, 2013), this study addresses the issues of incompatibility between the paradigms by selecting two non-contradicting paradigms to provide a clear understanding of the phenomenon under study.

This study employed a post-positivism paradigm as well as the critical paradigm for this systematic inquiry. Although the post-positivism paradigm is mostly associated with quantitative research, it also includes elements of qualitative research. As such, the post-positivism paradigm is not limited to quantitative aspects but also incorporates qualitative aspect of the study. While the main aim of post-positivism is to provide objective, value-free data (Neuman, 2011), this should not be separated from the context of the people. This context, which is subjective and close to people's lived experiences, is a key feature of qualitative research.

Dawadi et al. (2021) noted that post-positivism allows the researcher to interact with the participants and considers subjectivity in their experiences, views, and perspectives on reality. This paradigm was crucial for understanding participants' perspectives, as it does not

separate people from the environment while maintaining the scientific processes that govern mixed methods research.

Given that the development of critical consciousness among social work students during online learning was a central aim of this study, a critical paradigm was also employed. Asghar (2013) describes the critical paradigm as being concerned with the issues of human emancipation. This point is further supported by Froner (2018), who argued that critical discourse within this paradigm is necessary for both explanation and emancipation. In addition, Sewpaul et al. (2015) asserted that in social work, critical paradigms allow for critical consciousness in radical and empowering actions. In order to study individuals, the researcher needed to consider participants' social, cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts (Asghar, 2013), which shape their worldview. This paradigm is particularly relevant for understanding the impact of online learning on social work education's goal of emancipatory education. The critical paradigm also assisted to establish and understand the issues of power, inequality, and social change that were rooted in participants' experiences enabling an investigation of the students' development of critical consciousness during online learning, while considering the social, political, cultural, and economic factors that influenced their experiences. This study was rooted in fairness and justice to understand these experiences. The researcher was required to be patient, persistent, imaginative, sympathetic, honest, courageous, and self-disciplined during data collection – without these qualities, challenges in the research field would have been difficult to overcome.

4.4. Research Approach

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach, which combines quantitative and qualitative approaches in one study. Mixed-methods research is regarded as a third approach complementing both quantitative and qualitative research, allowing for the collection of both types of data (Hall, 2013). The rationale for adopting mixed methods is to gain a

comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

This study is specifically rooted in the developmental mixed-methods strand while also drawing from triangulation, complementary, initiation, and expansion principles. Combs and Onwuegbuzie (2010) noted that when development is identified as the purpose, then the researcher uses the results from one analytical strand to help inform the other.

In this study, neither the quantitative nor the qualitative approach alone was sufficient to answer the research questions or to make a successful claim on the hypothesis and conclusion. After engaging with the literature and identifying the research gaps, the researcher concluded that a mixed methods approach was necessary. This decision was further supported by the preliminary analysis of quantitative data, which did not give a completed picture. The mixed-methods approach was regarded as crucial for painting a complete picture and "providing an opportunity for a greater assortment of divergent or complementary views; which are valuable as they not only lead to extra reflection and enrich our understanding of a phenomenon but also open new avenues for future inquiries" (Dawadi, et al. 2021, pg. 28). In addition, the analysis of quantitative data raised the following new questions: How were epistemological dialogues utilised during online learning in social work education? What is the impact of online learning on the development of critical consciousness? How did epistemological dialogues contribute to critical consciousness during online learning in South Africa? These questions emerged during the preliminary analysis of quantitative data, highlighting the need for a mixed methods approach. The discussion of the positionality of both quantitative and qualitative aspects of this study is provided below. It is important to note that the separation of the quantitative and qualitative aspects in the following sections is intended to clearly show how each method was used in this mixed-methods research.

Quantitative approach

The quantitative research approach is focused on testing objective theories and examining relationships among variables (Babbie, 2016). This study sought to measure the impact of online learning on emancipatory education in social work by investigating the relationship between online learning, critical consciousness, and epistemological dialogues. Specifically, this study sought to investigate and test the relationships between the following variables: Online learning (Independent variable); Epistemological dialogues (Independent & mediating variable); and Critical consciousness [Transformative consciousness and Transformative action] (dependent variable). This study aimed to collect data from a larger scale, thus justifying the adoption of a quantitative research approach. To facilitate this, a hypothetical model was developed at the start of the research, encompassing the key variables. The following are the hypotheses underpinning this research:

H0: Online learning does not result in the development of critical consciousness

H1: Online learning results in the development of critical consciousness

H0: Online learning does not increase the use of epistemological dialogues

H2: Online learning increases the use of epistemological dialogues

H0: Epistemological dialogues do not mediate the relationship between online learning and critical consciousness

H3: Epistemological dialogues mediate the relationship between online learning and critical consciousness.

Hypothesized model based on central variables in this study:

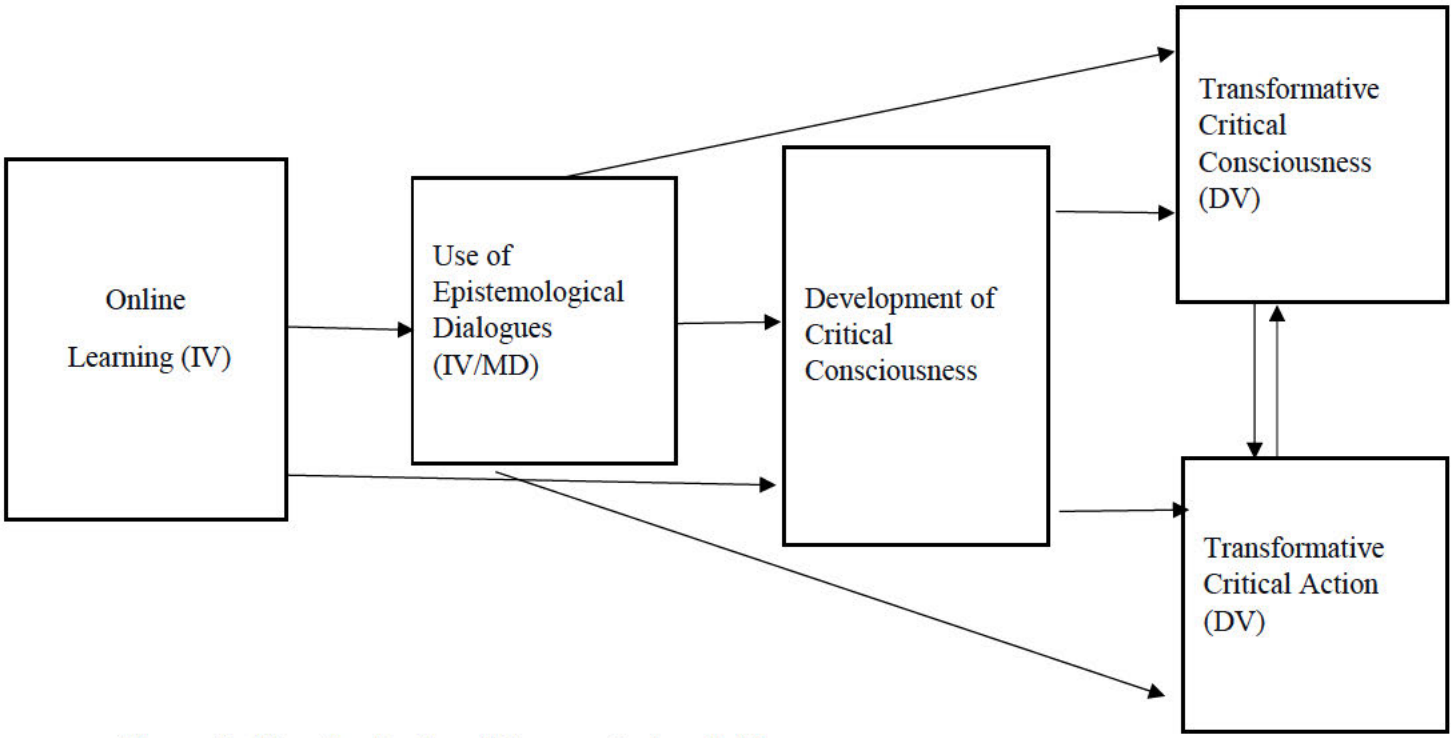


Figure 2: Hypothesized model on central variables

Qualitative approach

Creswell and Creswell (2018) asserted that qualitative inquiries focus on understanding the meanings attached to experiences (social or human problems), through the use of techniques that inform inductive reasoning. In this approach, individuals are seen as representative of their context, with the belief that a single person in a group reflects the feelings, experiences, and ideas of the entire group. In this study, the qualitative approach was fundamental, as the focus was on the subjective elements of the participants' experiences. Therefore, an in-depth understanding and analysis of the participants' viewpoints were carried out throughout the research process. The qualitative aspect of this research generated data which answered the following research questions: How were epistemological dialogues utilised during online learning in social work education? What is the impact of online learning on the development of critical consciousness? How did epistemological dialogues contribute to critical consciousness during online learning in South Africa?

4.5. Research Design

This study adopted an explanatory sequential research design. In this design, quantitative set of data was collected and analysed in the first phase, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data in the second phase. This design assisted in explaining the quantitative results in greater depth (Chaumba, 2013). The goal of this research was to first map and scale the broader impact of online learning on the envisioned emancipatory social work education, which led to the adoption of an explanatory sequential design. This design is rooted in the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data, before both sets of data are merged (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Additionally, Dawadi et al. (2021) emphasise that the research goal should be given priority when using the sequential design.

The quantitative phase was conducted to gather data on descriptive statistics, correlations, and mediation among variables in this study – namely, online learning (IV), epistemological dialogues (IV/MV), and critical consciousness [transformative critical consciousness & transformative critical action] (DV). Meanwhile, the qualitative phase focused on a detailed exploration of the phenomenon under study, particularly the impact of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on the envisioned emancipatory social work education. This exploration was informed by the quantitative results.

This study thus moved from broader reasoning within social science research to more specific reasoning. This process followed the progression from deductive to inductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning is a logical process that starts with a broad and general assumption and moves to a specific point, while inductive reasoning begins with specific observations and moves towards broader abstract concepts (Neuman, 2011). This shift in reasoning was evident throughout the research process.

Below is an illustration of the design employed in this study:

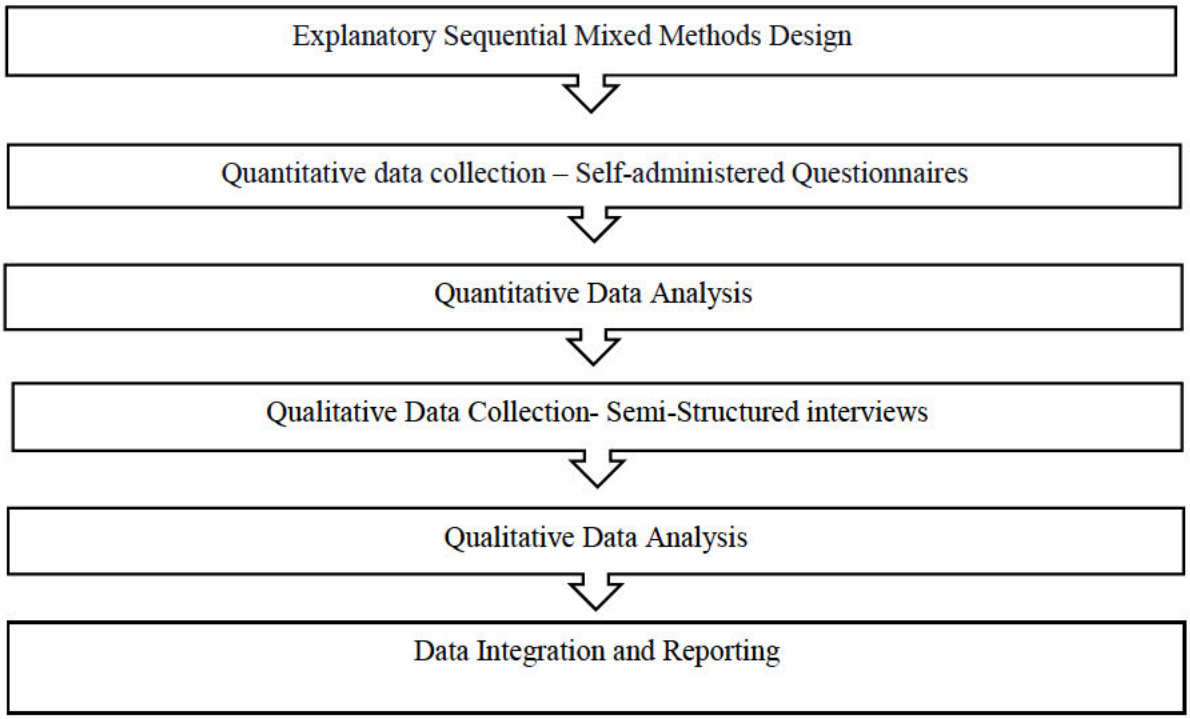


Figure 3: Study Design

4.6. Population and Sampling

According to Rahman et al (2022), a total population refers to a group of people about whom researchers wish to make broad generalisations and inferences in a study. For this research, the total population consisted of social work students. However, it was not enough to just focus on social work students as the target population, therefore, it was important to establish a sampling frame, which is often referred to as the study population. Based on the focus area of the study, the study population, for this research, included social work students who learned through online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sampling

Sampling is determined by various factors, including but not limited to the available resources, the anticipated techniques of analysis, the perceived variation in the universe; and the level of precision required for estimates to be made about the universe based on sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Rahi, 2017). The identified factors also contribute to

determining the sample size.

In a mixed-method study, the sample should represent both quantitative and qualitative approaches. For this reason, two different but complementary sampling phases or processes were undertaken. This section discusses the sampling methods used in this study, sample size determination, sampling procedure, criteria, and techniques for both quantitative and qualitative phases.

Sampling Methods

This study employed both probability and non-probability sampling methods. These methods complement the quantitative (probability) or qualitative (non-probability) approach used in the study. Since this was a mixed-method study, it was crucial to incorporate both methods into the sampling and data collection process, beginning with the probability sampling method, followed by the non-probability sampling method.

Sampling Procedure and Criteria

The sampling procedure outlines the steps taken to recruit participants for a study, while the sampling criteria define the subset of the study population that qualifies to be included in the study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The inclusion and exclusion criteria should be well defined.

As part of the sampling procedure, it was important to obtain class lists from the administrators to determine the total number of students. A gatekeeper's letter was requested from the identified research site, and ethical clearance (UKZN HSSREC) was obtained prior to data collection. To recruit students, the researcher visited the research sites, specifically during social work lectures, with prior arrangements made with the respective module lecturers.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria: enrolment in the identified university social work programme, registration as undergraduates in the years 2020, 2021,

and 2022), learning through online learning, and age 18 or older. This criterion led to the selection of level two, three, and four students, as they met the criteria. First-year students were excluded because they had no experience of online learning during the time of data collection. Postgraduate students in social work were also excluded, as their programmes are primarily research-based and do not include coursework. This criterion was applied to quantitative and qualitative sampling and data collection processes.

First phase: Quantitative Sampling

In line with the explanatory sequential design of this study, quantitative sampling and data collection preceded qualitative sampling and data collection. This section discusses the sampling size determination, criteria, techniques and process for quantitative sampling

Sample Size Determination

To ensure statistical probability and provide equal chances for participants to be sampled or selected from the population, it was essential to determine the sample size. Sample size determination has been an important technique since 1967, as discussed in the work of Yamane (Islam, 2018). According to Singh and Masuku (2014), determining the sample size is a technique for choosing the number of participants to include in a sample, which is critical for making inferences about the population. Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that sample size is a trade-off, meaning while larger sample sizes provide for a more accurate generalisation of results, they are mostly costly and time-consuming.

It is worth noting that Researchers have varying opinions on the ideal sample size. Some recommend selecting 10 percent of the total population, while others suggested that sample size should be determined based on the analysis plan (Beaujean, 2019). Additionally, some argued that to enable generalisation in descriptive or correlational quantitative research studies, a researcher needs a minimum number of n=100 (Delice, 2010). For this study, the sample size was determined to ensure accurate inferences and strong and high statistical

power (Singh and Masuku, 2014). This was done to minimise chances of committing a type two error (the error of not rejecting a null hypothesis when the alternative hypothesis is the true state of nature) and to maintain an appropriate significance level and margin of error to avoid a type one error (rejecting the null (H0) when the alternative hypothesis (H1) is true) (Das et al., 2016). The target population for this study included 460 social work students, as provided by the university's social work administrator. For an accurate generalisation of results to the entire population, the sample size was determined to account for statistical measures as per the requirement of the quantitative aspect of this research (Islam, 2018). The determination of the sample size for the finite population followed the guidelines outlined by Yamane's (1967):

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where?

n= Required minimum sample size

N= Population Size

e= Margin of error (assumed as 0.05%)

$$n=\frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

$$n=\frac{460}{1+460(0,05)^2}$$

$$n=\frac{460}{2,15}$$

n= 213

The sample size for the quantitative part of the study was n=213 participants. A total of n=213 cases were recruited to participate in the study.

Sampling Techniques

Sampling techniques are defined as strategies used for data collection (Creswell, 2014). This study employed simple random sampling, which is a technique that grants the study population an equal chance of being selected (Noor et al., 2022). According to Noor et al. (2022), simple random sampling is appropriate when the population has homogenous characteristics, and the sampling list is readily available. A population list is essential for understanding the population's characteristics, determining sample size, and ensuring random selection, thereby avoiding bias (Noor et al., 2022). This probability sampling technique ensures higher reliability and reduces the risk of confounding variables (Noor et al., 2022). Noor et al. (2022) emphasizes the importance of understanding the dynamics and characteristics of the study sample before selecting this sampling method. In this study, the researcher clearly defined the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the sample, which assisted in selection of participants.

The research sites, including social work classes (second, third, and fourth year students), were visited, and a random starting point for sampling was chosen. Thereafter, every second student seated in the classroom was selected. This method minimized biases and ensured that participants were selected purely by chance. It is important to note that not all participants were willing to participate in the study. In adhering to ethics, if a participant declined to participate, the next available participant was selected. This approach was in line with the requirements of the sample random technique.

Second Phase: Qualitative Sampling

Sample Size

Sample size determination applies not only to quantitative research but also to qualitative research, despite the differences in processes and approaches (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Common methods for determining sample size in qualitative studies include but are not

limited to, rules of thumb, point of saturation, conceptual models, numerical guidelines derived from empirical studies, and statistical formulae (Saunders et al., 2018). This study applied the rule of thumb method, which involved reviewing the minimum number of participants for social work studies employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Previous studies and student theses on the University of KwaZulu-Natal's research space typically included between 12- 20 participants. Based on this, the minimum sample size for this study was 15 participants, and 15 participants were sampled.

Sampling Techniques

For the qualitative phase of the study, a purposive sampling technique was employed. The process for participant selection began at the outset of data collection, based on their interest in the study and meeting the specified sampling criteria outlined earlier. These participants were identified after the quantitative data collection was completed and were then contacted to partake in the second phase of data collection. The inclusion of qualitative data in a sequential mixed-methods design is intended to provide better insight into the first set of data that was collected. (Dawadi et al., 2021; Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

4.7. Instrumentation and Data Collection

As this is a mixed-methods study, the data collection process integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This study adopted a connecting and building integration approach to mixed-methods data collection. A connecting integration approach is understood to occur when data are collected through the same sampling frame (Fetters et al.,2013). A building integration approach is understood to occur when one database informs the data collection of the other, for example, when quantitative data informs qualitative data collection (Fetters et al.,2013). In this study, the qualitative data was built upon the quantitative data, and one

sampling frame was used for both data collection processes. Even so, the process of quantitative and qualitative data sampling and collection were still applicable to this study.

First Phase: Quantitative Data Collection and Instrumentation

The data collection tool used in this study was a questionnaire. A questionnaire is defined as a list of questions that the participants answer, which can either be open-ended or close-ended (Bertram & Christiansen, 2015). The process of developing the questionnaire involved the following steps: 1) extensive literature search on the variables of this study, 2) identification of scales (pre-existing) and development of the scale (new) relating to variables in this study,3) modification of pre-scales, 4) testing scales for validity and reliability through pilot study (discussed below), and 5) reworking and adopting the scales.

The final questionnaire, therefore, included the following sections: sociodemographic information of participants, descriptive information on learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, binary scale on use of epistemological dialogues (ED) during online learning (11-item scale), and epistemological dialogues (ED) & critical consciousness (CC) scale (10-item) and critical consciousness (CC) scale – 46- items Likert scale adopted in Diemer et al., 2017, which was modified and divided into two parts: part one: transformative critical consciousness (TCC) (16 items), and part two: transformative critical action (TCA) (15 items). The adopted scales were used as measures for the quantitative aspect of this study. The self-administered questionnaires were in English, as the participants were university students (*Appendix one*).

The developed questionnaires were self-administered by students after they had been successfully recruited to participate in the study. On average, it took about 25 minutes to complete the questionnaire, though this varied depending on the participants 'level of study. From observation, participants enrolled in the second level took more time (30 minutes) to complete the questionnaire than participants enrolled in the third (25 minutes) and fourth year

(20 minutes). This difference in completion time can be attributed to factors such as key study concepts, language, level of understanding, and uncertainty. To mitigate these challenges, the researcher's presence was important. It is important to note that the pilot study, which preceded data collection, assisted in reworking the questionnaire to minimise challenges in data collection and in preparing the researcher for potential challenges in data collection.

The pilot study for this research:

According to Junyong (2017), a pilot of a study is a pre-test conducted on a smaller scale to assess the feasibility of the main study and to test the data collection instruments. It helps identify any issues with the study design as well as the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, thus. improving the overall study set to be conducted (Junyong, 2017). In this research, a pilot study was conducted with final-year social work students towards their exiting point ensuring that these participants did not partake in the main study as this may compromise the reliability of the study. The pilot study revealed that it would take approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. It also highlighted areas where questions, items, or concepts needed refinement for clarity. This process was imperative in also measuring the reliability of the scales in the study. The reliability scores for the scales were greater than 70 percent, confirming their reliability for the main study.

Second Phase: Qualitative data collection and instrumentation

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants who met the selection criteria. According to Kallio et al. (2016), semi-structured interviews provide flexibility and allow researchers to adapt interview questions as the conversation evolves. While the questions should be guided by specific themes, they should not be fixed; the interview should be dynamic and allow for discussion. Therefore, interview schedules should be designed as guides to be used during interviews, to provides direction for the

interviews. Bearman (2019, pg. 1) defines a semi-structured interview schedule as "the list of topics and associated questions that the interviewer asks the participant." It is important for the interview schedule to be narrow and focused, rather than covering broad topics.

In this study, semi-structured interview schedules were designed based on the research questions and the analysis of the quantitative data from the first phase of data. The interview schedule includes the following sections (*Appendix two)*: Section one: socio-demographic information of participants, and section two: themes and factors that were explored during the interviews. The interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and no participant refused to be recorded. The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 to55 minutes, with the length determined by the flow of the conversation. The interview recordings were transcribed and stored securely together with transcripts for analysis. Interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom and Microsoft Teams as well as in person.

4.8. Data Management and Data Analysis

Data management

Data management is defined as the process of acquiring, storing, and organising data for analysis (Creswell, 2014). This section discusses the data management procedures for both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of this study.

First phase: Quantitative Data Management

Quantitative data consists of numeric information, such as measurements, counts, survey responses on scales, and numerical values (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). For the quantitative phase of this study, data were collected using questionnaires, which were coded and entered into the statistical package for social science research (SPSS). The data coding process ensured the data accurately reflected the results, and a codebook (*Appendix three*) was used to maintain consistency. During data coding, levels of measurement were assigned for each item on a questionnaire. Levels of measurements are crucial as they define how

precise and refined the data needs to be for analysis. Neuman (2011, p. 222) explains that these levels guide the cleaning and preparation of data. The four main levels of measurement are: Interval, Ordinal, Nominal, and Ratio/Scale. The data was further cleaned by discarding questionnaires with missing information and allowing SPSS to compute missing statistics. The SPSS dataset was then stored in a secure password-protected zip folder. The completed questionnaires were securely stored in a locker and will be retained for five (5) years.

Second Phase: Qualitative data management

In this study, qualitative data consisted of interview recordings, which were transcribed into text data. After transcribtion, both the recordings and transcripts were backed up in a password-protected OneDrive folder. Additionally, they were stored in a password-protected zip folder on the researcher's laptop. Hard copies of these materials were kept in a secured locker and will be stored for five (5) years. Only the supervisor and the researcher can access the data, any external access would be permitted by court order or a formal request from a university board.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study occurred in two phases: quantitative data analysis in the first phase and qualitative data analysis in the second phase. Both sets of data were then merged/integrated at the analysis and reporting stages. Below are the detailed processes of analysis for both phases and data integration:

Quantitative Data Analysis:

The analysis of the quantitative data for this study was carried out using SPSS. In the first phase, the study employed descriptive statistics and multivariate regression analysis. According to Gordon (2015), simple descriptive statistical analysis provides basic statistical and graphic information about datasets, summarising a collected set of data. Simple descriptive statistics were used to analyse the descriptive data of the study. SPPS assisted in

generating visuals, charts, and graphs, which were used for descriptive purposes. Statistical and numerical measures, including central tendency measures (mean, median, and mode), were calculated for the scales.

Multivariate regression analysis was employed to determine the correlations and dependencies between variables in this study. This type of analysis is essential for research involving two or more independent variables that can predict the dependent variable (Alexopoulos, 2010). This study employed both linear regression (for continuous variables) and logistical regression (for binary variables). The primary focus in the first phase was analysing the relationship between the study variables. The results were used to accept or reject the hypotheses regarding the following variables: Online learning (Independent Variable), epistemological dialogues (Independent/mediating variable), critical consciousness (transformative critical consciousness and transformative critical action as dependent variables). Additionally, a mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Marco to determine the mediating effect of variables. Overall, the inferential statistical analysis, including bivariate, multivariate, and mediation analysis, as well as descriptive statistics, were used to draw statistically significant inferences conclusions in the study.

Qualitative Analysis:

In the second phase, the study employed discourse analysis, focusing on language and the meanings attached to both spoken and written language. The analysis considered social history and experiences for a non-biased exploration (Kamalu & Osisanwo, 2015). Discourse analysis has various forms; however, this study used thematic analysis, which allowed for the identification of themes in the collected data and development of meaningful interpretations based on them (Mogashoa, 2014). The researcher personally engaged in the transcription process, ensuring accuracy, and applied coding methods, including open and axial coding, to the transcribed data. This resulted in the identification of themes and sub-themes, followed by

data synthesis. As Sutton and Austin (2015) note, this process is crucial for ensuring data integrity. It is important to highlight that this was not a linear process; rather, it involved iterative analysis, revisiting the data to uncover meanings beyond the participants' said words.

Locke (2004) argued that discourse shapes systems of knowledge, beliefs, teaching and learning policies, and social structures. When discourse analysis is used as a discursive practice, it reveals hegemonic processes within social practices and systems (Kamalu & Osisanwo, 2015). As such, this analysis was embedded in a critical discourse approach, linking the historical context of learning with the focus of study. It aimed to interpret and explain views on understanding and developing critical consciousness within social work praxis, while considering students' reflective practices. This study aimed to uncover the different ideologies and meanings behind collected data. Furthermore, context was essential for reconstructing the participants' intended meanings.

4.9. Data Integration

Data integration is one of the most important components of mixed-methods research. According to Othman et al. (2020), data integration combines quantitative results and qualitative findings to provide a more comprehensive understanding. This integration can occur at various stages of the research: planning, data collection, analysis, and reporting (Othman et al., 2020). In this study, the integration of data occurred at the analysis and reporting stages of the research.

This study employed a continuous approach to integrating data throughout the analysis process. The first phase involved analysing quantitative data, followed by the second phase of qualitative data analysis. At the reporting level, this study used both narrative and joint displays to integrate of findings. These methods were instrumental in painting a

comprehensive picture of the findings, merging both quantitative and qualitative data for each objective in the report.

For effective data integration, an assessment of fit is necessary. Fetters et al. (2013) describe three possible outcomes for integration and assessment of fit:

> ***Confirmation*** *occurs when the findings/ results from both types of data confirm the results of the other i.e. quantitative being confirmed by the qualitative data;*
>
> ***Expansion*** *occurs when the findings/ results from two sets of data (qualitative and quantitative) diverge and expand insights of the phenomenon of interest by addressing different aspects of a single phenomenon or by describing complementary aspects of a central phenomenon of interest; or* ***Discordance*** *which occurs if the qualitative and quantitative findings/ results are inconsistent, incongruous, contradict, conflict, or disagree with each other.*

In this study, quantitative data revealed the strength of associations, while qualitative data deliberated on the nature of those associations. Notably, confirmation and expansion were evident in the study. For example, the majority of participants in the quantitative data indicated that the students were participating in online classes. However, the interviews revealed that participation occurred mostly between the same group of students and the lecturers. This demonstrated the confirmation (agreeing that there was participation) and expansion (participation was only to the few students in class). This highlights the importance of integrating approaches, as the data is not taken at face value based on numbers, but the narrative accounts were instrumental for the comprehensive analysis and understanding of the phenomenon under study.

4.10. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical research principles to ensure the ***protection of human participants***. The first step was to apply for a gatekeeper's letter from the identified research

site, which was granted (*Appendix four)*. An application for ethical clearance was also submitted to the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Human Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC), and the study received approval [protocol reference no: HSSREC/00004970/2022] (*Appendix five*). The following ethical principles were adhered to by the researcher:

Informed consent

According to Babbie (2016), informed consent is a fundamental prociple in which participants voluntarily agree to take part in research projects on a full understanding of the possible risks involved, if there are any. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study and the researcher. This ensured that they had a full understanding of the purpose of the study. An informed consent form was issued and signed by participants. However, some participants expressed concerns that they would be identified through their signatures, so verbal consent was obtained in these cases. The informed consent template and information participation sheet are attached (*Appendix six*).

Voluntary Participation

Participants in the study were assured that they could terminate or withdraw from the study anytime without facing any consequences. Voluntary participation continues to be an important ethical principle in research and social work, as self-determination is vital in any engagement, be it research or practice.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

According to Babbie (2016), a research project guarantees anonymity when the researcher and the people who read about the research findings cannot identify a given response to be from a particular participant. Confidentiality is guaranteed when the researcher keeps participants' information participants private (Babbie, 2016). In this study, the participants were not asked to disclose any identifying information such as names, student numbers, or

identity numbers. Furthermore, the information shared by participants was kept confidential between them and the researcher. All research data was securely stored and password-protected, accessible only to the researcher and supervisor. This applies both to online and physical data. Pseudonyms were used on transcripts and in the reporting of qualitative data.

Non-Maleficence

According to Bertram and Christiansen (2015), non-maleficence means not harming participants. There was no physical or psychological harm associated with participating in this study. However, given that the study investigated the impact of COVID-19 on students' education, there were emotional risks associated, where participants might have been triggered. However, during the data collection process, no participant reported being triggered or in need of urgent brief counselling. Nevertheless, mechanisms were put in place to address such issues should they arise. The researcher, a registered social worker, was prepared to provide brief counselling if necessary. If further intervention was needed, the participants were to be referred to the student counselling unit within the research site.

Privacy and Deception

Creswell (2014) emphasised that privacy involves the protection of participants, showing respect, and valuing their contributions. Deception, on the other hand, refers to misleading participants (Babbie, 2016). In this study, interviews were conducted in private spaces to ensure participants' privacy, the online Zoom meetings were also private. Participants were informed during the recruitment process that there were no tangible benefits associated with participation in the study.

4.11. Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness

Reliability

This study used Cronbach Alpha to measure the reliability of the scales. Shrestha (2021) argued that Cronbach Alpha provides a simple method for measuring whether or not a scale

is reliable. It is used under the assumption that multiple items are measuring the same underlying construct. For this study, a five-point Likert scale was adopted, with a low score of 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and a high score of 5 indicating "strongly agree." A binary scale, with a low score of 1 and a high score of 2, was also used. This study utilised a 46-item critical consciousness Likert scale (adopted in Diemer et al., 2017), which had Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate of .90 for Critical Reflection on Perceived Inequality, .88 for Critical reflection on Egalitarianism, and .85 for Critical Action on Socio-political Participation. These scales were modified and adopted to align with the objectives and focus of this study. Additionally, the study included categorical/binary scales for online learning and the use of epidemiological dialogues, and critical consciousness and the use of epistemological dialogues, which were tested in the initial pilot study. Overall, the self-administered questionnaire was piloted and tested for Cronbach's Alpha reliability. The following are the Cronbach's Alpha reliability estimates for the scales used in the study:

Name of the Scale	Items in the Scale	Cronbach's reliability alpha
1. *Binary Scale on Use of Epistemological Dialogues (ED) during Online Learning*	11	.749
2. *Epistemological Dialogues (ED) & Critical Consciousness (CC) Scale*	10	.785
3.		
4. Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC) Likert Scale	16	.702
5. Transformative Critical Action (TCA) Likert Scale	15	.808

Table 1: Reliability Scores of the Scales

Validity

The scales within the self-administered questionnaire were tested for validity. Validity is understood as the truthfulness and accuracy of a measure or scale in measuring what is supposed to be measured (Neuman, 2011). The scales in the questionnaire were tested for content validity using the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor

analysis (CFA). According to Sürücü & Maşlakçi (2020, pg. 2700), EFA is "usually performed to reduce the number of variables observed in scale development and to determine what factors it creates." This is usually performed to increase exploratory power amongst a set of constructs on a scale. EFA was performed on the following on the scales adopted in this study.

In scale development, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Barlett's Sphericity test were used. KMO measured the adequacy of the sample size to ensure that the statistical power was not compromised, while the Barlett's Sphericity test assesses the hypothesis (H0 & H1) and the correlation matrix of variables and the relatedness and un-relatedness of these variables (Shretha, 2021). These tests were used to ensure the validity of constructs in the scale and to ensure that scales did not have multiple items repeated. Similarly, Shrestha (2021) argued that factor analysis should be conducted on the initial questionnaire to detect irrelevant items and extract valuable factors from the data set. Furthermore, CFA was performed on the modified critical consciousness scale to measure the accuracy of this scale, as CFA is designed to measure the validity of previously validated scales (Sürücü & Maşlakçi, 2020). CFA is a more complex and sophisticated technique used in the research process to test specific hypotheses or theories about the underlying structure of a set of variables.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was essential in the qualitative aspect of this study. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), trustworthiness is one of the validity methods used to assess the accuracy of findings from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants, or the readers. While qualitative research does not test for reliability, it is important that transcripts are free of obvious mistakes, that codes do not shift in meaning during the coding process, and that cross-check codes are applied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To ensure the trustworthiness of

the research, Kallio et al. (2016) recommended pilot testing the interview schedules, whichcould be pretested within the research team, expert-tested by specialists in the field of research, and field-tested with the potential participants (also a form of sharing details about the study). This process also contributes toward increasing the validity of the study and the intelligibility of both participants and researchers. Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability are key components of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Yin, 2014).

According to Korstjens & Moser (2018), creditability refers to the truthfulness of the research findings, and the extent to which these findings present plausible information drawn from the participants' original data, which is true in interpretation. In this study, credibility was ensured through prolonged engagements with the research data and participants, as well as by checking with participants if there were unclear recorded findings. Confirmation of research findings by participants was also crucial in this process.

Transferability refers to the degree to which qualitative findings can be applied to other contexts or settings (Yin, 2014). The study ensured transferability by not only describing participants' subjective experiences but also by locating these experiences within a broader context, such as social work education. It is through this thick description of participants' subjective experiences that the outsider can gain an understanding of the social context. This is an important process in qualitative research, as individual experiences are deemed as social experiences (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

According to Korstjens & Moser (2018), dependability refers to the stability of findings over time, and it requires that participants evaluate the findings, interpretations, and recommendations of the study. To ensure dependability, the researcher maintained transparency with participants and kept records of meetings, recordings, and transcripts. Additionally, the research processes were shared with the participants.

The study also aimed to achieve confirmability, which refers to the extent to which the interpretations regarding the findings of the study correspond with the actual data that was collected (Yin, 2014). Korsjens & Mose (2018) further describe confirmability as the degree to which the findings of the study can be confirmed by other researchers. To ensure confirmability, the researcher ensured that the data were accurate and reflected the actual data collected. The researcher also engaged in the process of reflexivity, maintaining a daily diary during data collection to remain aware of personal biases, perceptions, and preferences.

4.12. Triangulation

According to Neuman (2011), triangulation refers the combination of multiple methods to study the same phenomenon. It is further referred to as a process that assists in increasing the reliability and validity of results and findings (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). Bans-Akutey and Tiimub (2021) also note that triangulation is not the same as mixed methods. While this is valid, the researcher in this study maintains that mixed methods are grounded in the principles of triangulation. This study adopted a multiple-paradigm approach, using two non-contradicting paradigms to contributed to the different dimensions of this study. The study engaged in different forms of triangulation, including triangulation of research approach (quantitative and qualitative), data collection methods (self-administered questionnaires and semi-structured interviews) and results. The process of triangulation was intended to significantly contribute to the reliability, validity, and trustworthiness of the study.

4.13. Limitations of the Study

It is important to acknowledge that every research study has its strengths and limitations. De Vos et al. (2011) argued that limitations should be clearly stated because they exist in all research, even when the study is carefully planned. According to Theofanidis et al. (2019, pg. 156), limitations refer to “any particular study concerns potential weaknesses that are usually

out of the researcher's control, and are closely associated with the chosen research design/s, statistical model constraints, funding constraints, or other factors." These limitations are viewed as 'imposed' restrictions that are out of the researcher's control, unlike delimitations where the researcher has full control over what they choose to include in the study (e.g., theoretical background, objectives, research questions, variables under study, study sample, and sampling techniques) (Theofanidis et al., 2019). While acknowledging limitations is essential, it is equally important to identify the strengths of the study and how limitations were addressed. This ensures the study is trustworthy and reliable, contributing valuable insights to the readers and the Applied Human Science and Social Science fields.

In identifying the strengths of the current study, it is important to first highlight that the researcher adhered to ethical guidelines during the data collection process. This ensured that the research was conducted in an ethical and competent manner. The researcher's experience in interviewing participants was also crucial in maintaining ethical standards. Additionally, the use of SPSS for entering and analysing data proves the results to be reliable, as SPSS is recognised as one of the most modern and reliable software tools in Social Science research (Nagaiah & Ayyanar, 2016). SPSS enabled the researcher to automate data for presentation and analysis of results.

One of the limitations of the study was social desirability, where participants may give answers that they believe are favourable to the researcher. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted, social desirability is difficult to control, especially in qualitative studies. To address this, the researcher remained neutral and adhered to ethical principles and standards. Another limitation was the challenge of generalizing the research findings, especially in environments characterised by heterogeneous cultural, political, and economic statuses (Theofanidis et al., 2019). Furthermore, using pre-tested scales does not guarantee validity nor does it guarantee the reliability of the constructs measured in a scale. As a result, this

study cannot fully assume a causal effect on the variables measured, as external factors may contribute to and alter the findings and results.

4.14. Conclusion

This chapter began with a theoretical discussion of a research paradigm adopted in this study, followed by an explanation of how this paradigm was applied throughout the research. It then discussed the research design employed, the population, and the sampling strategies used in the study. The chapter also covered data management, analysis, and data integration. Additionally, the concepts of reliability, validity, and trustworthiness were discussed, with a focus on triangulation. The ethical standards adhered to by the researcher were also outlined, followed by a discussion of the limitations of this study. Finally, the chapter concluded with a summary. Notably, this chapter was grounded within a mixed-methods research approach, providing a detailed explanation of the mixed-methods processes adopted in this study and their alignment with the study design.

Chapter Five

Results

Navigating Digital Divides: Sociodemographic Dynamics of Online Learning in South African Social Work Education

5.1. Introduction

The oppressive systems entrenched in the South African context have contributed to the digital divide (Menon & Motala, 2022; Odeyemi, 2021). When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the country was already grappling with pre-existing inequalities. These disparities cannot be ignored, nor can they be put aside as they form the basis of the worldviews, experiences and realities of students. In studying emancipatory social work education, these inequalities are crucial, as they position students in learning, i.e. how they learn, and how they perceive and receive education. Therefore, it is important to understand how the socio-demographics of participants interacted with the digital divide within social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study investigated the impact of online learning, implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, on the envisioned emancipatory social work education at a South African university. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design guided this research. The quantitative phase sampled N=213 undergraduate social work students. The following were the focus areas for the quantitative data collection:

- The extent to which epistemological dialogues were incorporated into social work education during online learning in South Africa.

- The relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness (Transformative Critical Consciousness [TCC] and Transformative Critical Action [TCA]) among social work students.
- The mediating role of epistemological dialogues in the relationship between online learning and critical consciousness development.

The qualitative phase involved 15 students and aimed to provide deeper insights into:

- The nature and use of epistemological dialogues in social work while online learning was employed.
- The impact of online learning on the development of critical consciousness among social work students during COVID-19 pandemic.
- The contribution of epistemological dialogues to critical consciousness development when online learning was used in Social Work education.

Accordingly, based on the research design, the analysis and interpretation of findings unfolded in two phases. The first phase focused on the quantitative data, followed by the second phase on the qualitative data. This study adopts an integrated approach for presenting the results and discussion, using narrative integration and joint display tables, to present and discuss results, guided by the overall research objectives. As such, both the quantitative results and qualitative findings will be presented across four chapters, with each chapter having a specific theme relating to the objectives of the study. This approach is hoped to give a comprehensive understanding of the results and arguments made thereafter. This chapter is the first chapter which present and discusses the results and findings.

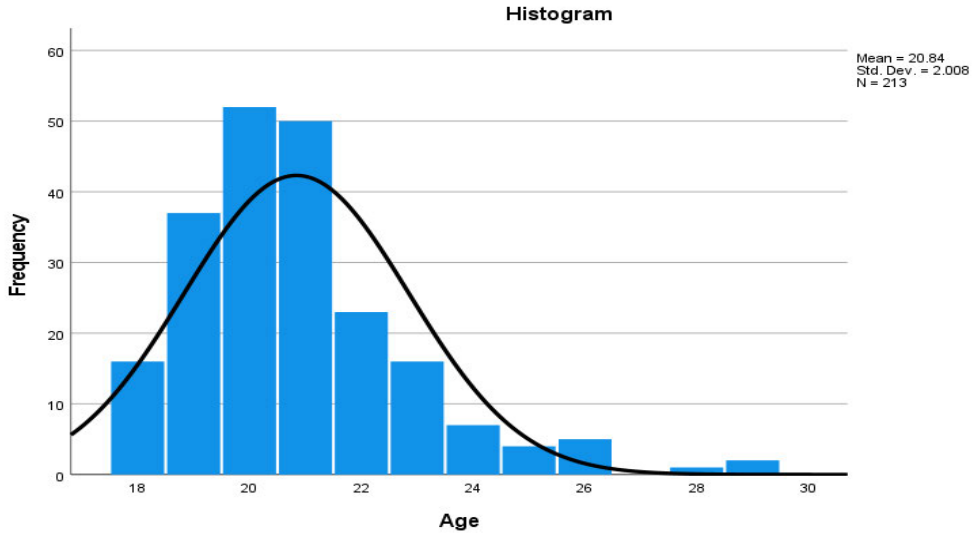
It is important to note that the inclusion of races across participants is intended for this chapter to demonstrate how online learning was experienced across different racial groups and the intersection of race with inequalities within the digital divide. In the subsequent

chapters, the participants are only identified by number. The chapter is fundamental for the subsequent chapters as it lays the groundwork for analysing and discussing the study's data. As the first of four chapters, it focuses on descriptive analyses of participants, including their demographics and how these related to online social work education in the South African context during the COVID-19 pandemic. The key descriptive statistical analyses presented here will serve as a reference for the subsequent chapters. By grounding the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants within the South African context during the COVID-19 pandemic, this chapter provides a critical reference point for understanding the implications for emancipatory social work education in the discussions that follow.

This chapter further delves into the sociodemographic factors that influence online learning experiences in South African social work education, with a particular emphasis on navigating the digital divide. The subsequent chapters will build upon this foundation by examining the relationships between online learning, critical consciousness development, and the mediating role of epistemological dialogues.

5.2. Univariate analysis of the Sociodemographic information of Participants

Age of Participants:



Graph 1: Age of participants

The graph above shows the age distribution of the participants in the study. The minimum age is 18 and the maximum age is 29 years. Through univariate analysis, the average age of participants was 20.84. It is evident that 20-year-olds were the largest group of participants, followed by 21-year-olds. 28-year-olds and 29-year-olds were the least represented in the study.

The above age demographics indicate students in social work are digital natives (as coined by Prensky, 2001). Digital natives are individuals born in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, and are often considered proficient with technology. Persada et al. (2020) also refer to these students as the internet generation or app-native generation. However, exposure to technology plays a significant role, in South Africa, and numerous studies have indicated that some of the students who come to university have not used technology in their lives, especially for learning (Makhanya and Mfishi, 2023; Makhanya, 2021; Dube, 2020), and this

is due to the inequalities. Therefore, this creates a scenario where age alone cannot be considered the sole determinant of a student's competency in the use of technology for learning. During the qualitative interviews, the participants shared the following regarding exposure to computers:

> Participant Seven [African: *"If I may be honest during high school we had limited access to use of computers, I come from a rural school (KwaMaphumulo) that did not have enough resources, we were even sharing textbooks, can you imagine computers then? But I would say, because I could travel to town to do some applications at an internet café and this was around 2018, 2019 I think but before I came here (University) I knew a bit of stuff even though I was not comfortable. So even when COVID-19 came, I could type and that but use of ZOOM and what do you call this… Teams, ay I will not lie I struggled and I think that is when the reality kicked in, only when I came to university and these things I knew them here…"*
>
> Participant Six [African]: *"Mina (me) this thing around computers was there at school and we went to the labs (computer) from time to time but I just did not like it, look even when I had my first cell phone it was just music and games for me, I did not even know that you can put up apps to learn (ZOOM), so coming to varsity and coming during the time where they were used was a bit of a challenge though I managed to pass but it was hard. Writing tests online for example was a really challenge because I had to try and type first and it was very difficult to even apply my thinking."*

The excerpts above demonstrate that, regardless of the participants' age and prior exposure, the use of online tools for learning was challenging. Phrase such as "…*do some application at an internet café"* and "…*we went to the labs (computer) from time to time*" represent a certain level of exposure to technology even in high schools. However, it can also

be argued that the excerpts above also highlight the limitations of the exposure, with participants having to travel or only accessing the computers at school. This is a mark of historical oppression in South Africa, and the ongoing consequences that the country continues to grapple with (Odeyemi, 2021). This study argues that prior knowledge and frequency of exposure to technology should also be regarded as key role players in determining competence for the use of technology for learning. In addition, the excerpt from Participant Six confirms the argument made by Ayalon, and Aharony, (2024) that students with more positive attitudes toward technology are most likely to have higher digital literacy- although this was not the case with Participant Six as attitudes were negative. While this observation is valid, the author maintains that developing positive attitudes towards technology, requires frequent exposure, which some students do not have until they reach university. The excerpts clearly show that the exposure was limited to routine tasks, such as making applications, rather than using technology for learning purposes as it is used in higher education. Moreover, being exposed to technology does not necessarily mean that one is competent in using technology for learning. This was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when online learning was introduced.

Demographics of Participants

Demographic	Frequency (n)	%
Gender		
Male	57	26,8
Female	156	73,2

Population group		
African	207	97,2
Indian/Asian	1	,5
Coloureds	5	2,3
Other	0	0
Geographic area		
Rural	102	43,7
Semi-Urban/ Township	66	55,4
Urban	45	,9
Economic status		
Lower Class	93	43,7
Middle Class	118	55,4
Upper Class	2	,9

Table 2: Demographic of participants

Gender

The table presented above displays the descriptive demographics of the study participants. The gender representation is predominantly females, comprising a larger proportion (73.2%) compared to males (26.8%). This reflects how the social work profession was historically and is currently gendered. The history of social work indicates that females have always been significantly more involved hence the general conceptualisation of the profession as a nurturing profession, which has, in turn, led to the marginalisation of the profession (Hicks, 2015). In the context of online learning, gender inequalities further exacerbate the digital divide, particularly in South Africa, where female students are often expected to participate in gendered household chores while actively engaging in their education. During the conversation with participants on the interception between gender roles and learning, the following emerged:

Participant (Thirteen) [African]: *"For me being the only female at home there was no understanding that I have to be in class even though everyone at home knew that I was registered at the university…so at first I would have to clean and do all the chores allocated to me. When it is time for class I would be disinterested even to participate because a lot would be happening around me. I remember at one time we had visitors, even though everyone else was around I was call do make tea. So, all this limited me to participate and engage fully in my classes."*

The above excerpt is the example of how households are gendered and the gender roles that are still reflected in different aspects of South African society. These gendered roles disadvantage female students' learning in online environments. This raises questions such as: how can female students be expected to perform at the same academic level as male students, when the roles are different and still affected by society? – it is crucial to note that this is not to doubt the ability of female students but to indicate the amount of load they have to carry. On one hand, while males are not immune to gendered roles, the author argues that the impact of these role is not as significant for them as is it for females. Although gender is not the only factor influencing learning experiences, this synopsis highlights the university's disengagement with the realities of society. If most of the students studying online are female, what are the implications for their learning and the roles they assume while learning online? These are the questions the author grapples with in understanding social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, given that many of the participants were females, understanding their ability to actively participate and develop critical consciousness during COVID-19 pandemic's online learning is crucial to understanding the dynamics social work education during this time.

Population Group

The majority of participants in this study are Africans (97.2%), followed by a small percentage of Coloureds (2.3%) and an even smaller percentage of Indian/Asian (0.5%). Historically, universities have been dominated by White, Asian, and Indian groups. However, there has been significant progress in including African students within universities, as evidenced by the large proportion of African students in this study. Despite this progress, African students still face barriers due to historical disadvantages.

A study conducted by Faloye and Ajayi (2022) found that most African students (68%) struggle to complete their learning tasks because of their unfamiliarity with technology. Meanwhile, White (95.7%), Indian (92.3%), and Coloured (90.9%) students reported no issues with using technology for online learning. This included areas such as self-study, where most African students reported to have faced difficulties in engaging with technology. Therefore, while African students make up the majority of participants in this study, they were more likely to lack the knowledge and understanding needed to effectively use technology for learning, excerpt from Participant Thirteen and six above support this argument. The use and understanding of technology have a direct link to the oppressive systems in South Africa (Makhanya, 2021; Faloye & Ajayi, 2022). As such, the experiences of online learning are diversely influenced by race (the main role player in the oppressive systems) contributing to how it was experienced amongst social work students. The excerpts below show how different races experienced learning online. Presented are the excerpts of Coloured and Indian participants on experiences with online learning:

> Participant One: *[Coloured] "…Yes, I come from the coloured family My family played a huge role on my side, for example I was allowed time to study, I had my own room to study, for example unlike my other classmate (African) I was not bothered with even participating because it was always quiet, even where I stay it was quiet."*

Participant Two [Indian]: *"It was okay to study online, I could participate even though I did not understand everything when they were speaking in IsiZulu. I had my computer which I used even during high school so it was not a challenge at all rather it gave me more opportunities for example. As am saying it was okay, I even had enough time to open my own shop, I sell and rebrand items, so it gave me a opportunity and more time to spend when I am not studying, also, I did not have to bother much about because we have a helper at home."*

The excerpt above highlights the intersections of geographic location, class and race during the COVID-19 pandemic. As evident above, Coloured and Indian students reported more positive experiences with access to learning. This highlights the importance of understanding historical disadvantages that perpetuated inequalities for African students and the realities they face today.

Geographic location and Economic status

Excerpts from Participant One and two, seven, thirteen and six above also highlight fundamental factors – specifically, how geographic location is closely correlated with economic status. Race, historically tied to geographic segregation and systemic exclusion, remains a central factor in South African higher education. Participant narratives reveal how structural inequality, rooted in apartheid-era policies, continues to shape their lived realities. Perumal et al., (2021) argued that socioeconomic backgrounds were fundamental in how students experience online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In South Africa, geographic location is closely associated with economic status, though there has been a shift in this association.

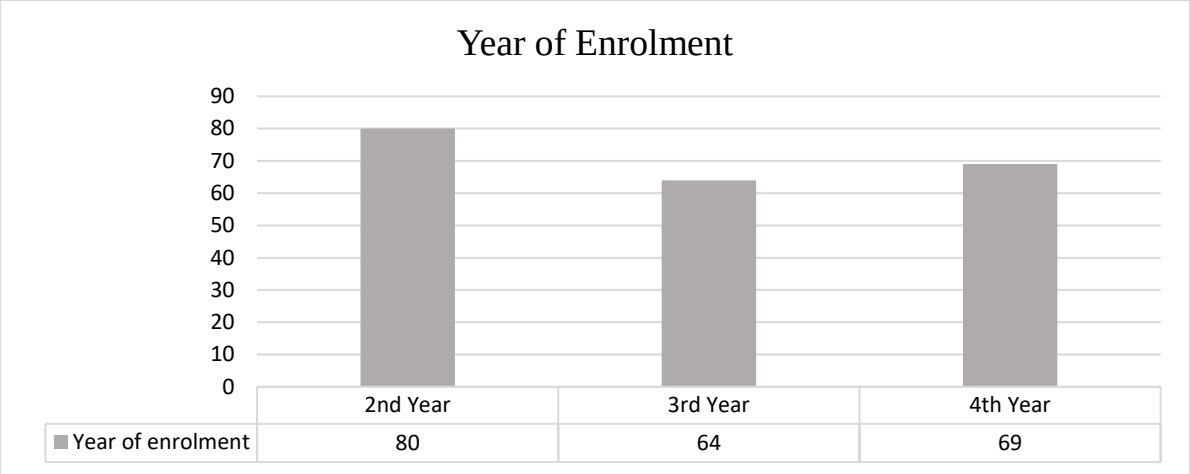
The majority of the participants in this study are from rural areas, and studies indicate that students from rural and semi-urban areas are more likely to come from a lower class, which impacts their learning experiences in universities (Makhanya and Mfishi, 2023;

Makhanya and Zibane, 2020). This is particularly important in understanding how learning occurs in historically disadvantaged countries such as South Africa. In this study, 43.7% of participants were from rural areas, and interestingly, 43.7% also identified as coming from a lower socioeconomic class. This confirms the association between geographic location and economic status. Students from rural and lower-class backgrounds face significant challenges, such as limited access to the Internet and limited resources (Dube, 2020; Kajiita, et al., 2020).

In addition to the above, the majority of participants (55.4%) fall into the middle-class category, while 28.2% were from semi-urban/township areas. Urban areas had the lowest number of participants (19.2%), and the upper class was represented by just 0.9% of the study participants. Despite the fact that the majority of participants were African, they remain the most disadvantaged, falling within the middle and low economic classes. While geographic location is not the sole determinant of being disadvantaged, the majority of participants are from rural and urban township areas and are most likely to be disadvantaged economically. Furthermore, the participant pool in the qualitative component of this study consisted of six males and nine females, all younger than twenty-five years old. The majority of participants (n=13) self-identified as African, with one participant each identifying as Coloured and Indian. These participants are also indifferent to the arguments made above.

It is worth-noting that the digital divide in South Africa, in the context of online learning, is exacerbated by socio-economic factors such as income, educational background, and geographic location. These factors directly influence the ability of individuals to engage with online learning platforms (Mutsvairo et al., 2019). In line with this assertion, this study argues that these issues were particularly amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among social work students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Year of Enrolment

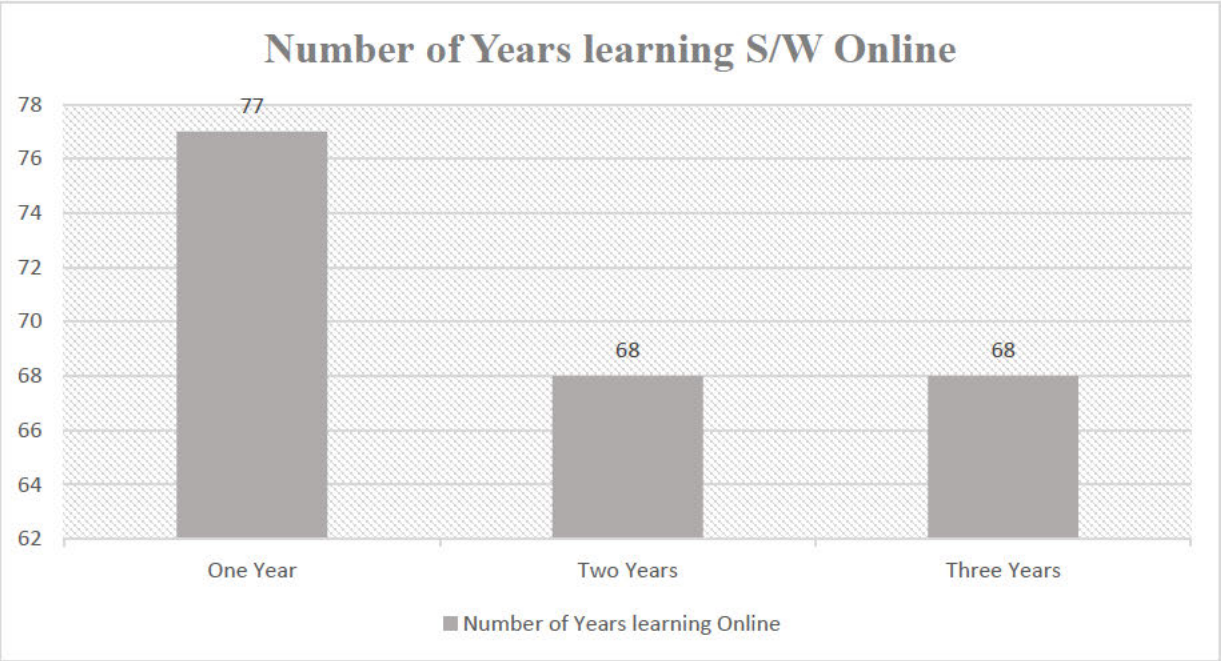


Graph 2: Participants Year of Enrolment

The graph depicted above displays the number of participants by year of enrolment at the university. Notably, the majority of participants were in their second year (n=80), followed by those in their fourth year (n=69), with the least number of participants in their third year (n=64). This distribution of participants across year groups highlights the potential role of year of enrolment in understanding online learning experiences. Since this study focused on students who transitioned to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, their experiences may differ from those who began their studies online i.e., those who enrolled during COVID-19 pandemic when online learning was already in use. Research suggests a correlation between year of enrolment and attitudes towards online learning, with students developing resilience to initial challenges as they progress through their studies **(**Moonasamy & Naidoo, 2022). This resilience does not negate the ongoing challenges, but rather reflects the development of coping mechanisms.

5.3. Descriptive Insights: Online Learning Dynamics Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Number of years learning Social Work online



Graph 3: Number of years Learning Social Work Online

The data presented in the figure above shows that approximately 60% of the participants had significant experience with online learning. Specifically, 36.2% of the participants reported having one year of online learning experience, while 31.9% each reported having two and three years of online learning experience. This distribution of experience level implies that a substantial proportion of the participants have been exposed to online learning for an extended period, with a significant number of them having at least two years of experience.

Preferred Method of learning

Preferred method for learning (%)	Frequency (n)	
Online Learning	117	54.9%
Blended/Face to face learning	96	45.1%

Table 3: Preferred Method for Learning

The results above reflect the preferred leaning methods among the participants. A slight majority, 54.9%, expressed a preference for online learning, which signifies a comfort with or preference for digital and remote educational methods. Conversely, 45.1% preferred blended or face-to-face learning, indicating a continued preference for traditional in-person or mixed learning environments. The nearly equal distribution between these preferences highlights the importance of offering diverse learning modalities to cater to individual needs and preferences, recognising that the blend of online and in-person learning methods may provide the most adaptable and effective approach to cater to different learning styles.

Clearly, there is a dichotomy of preferences regarding preferred learning methods among the sampled participants. While the quantitative results show a preference for online learning, the qualitative findings provide a different perspective, with participants emphasising the importance of face-to-face social work education. Be that as it may, critical scholars argue that face-to-face learning is not immune to the digital divide, as there are evident power dynamics even in classrooms, and university structures and systems continue to perpetuate the oppression of the disadvantaged.

Faloye and Ajayi (2022), argued that digital divide creates an uneven playing field for students in higher education. It is in this regard that this study argues that students from low-income backgrounds who might be drawn to social work because of their lived experiences often lack access to reliable internet and technology, which may hinder their ability to fully

participate in online learning. The dominance of online preferences skews the data towards those with better access, misrepresenting the preferences within the broader population. This is influenced by a number of factors; the following excerpt provide more in-dept insights into the participants' preferences:

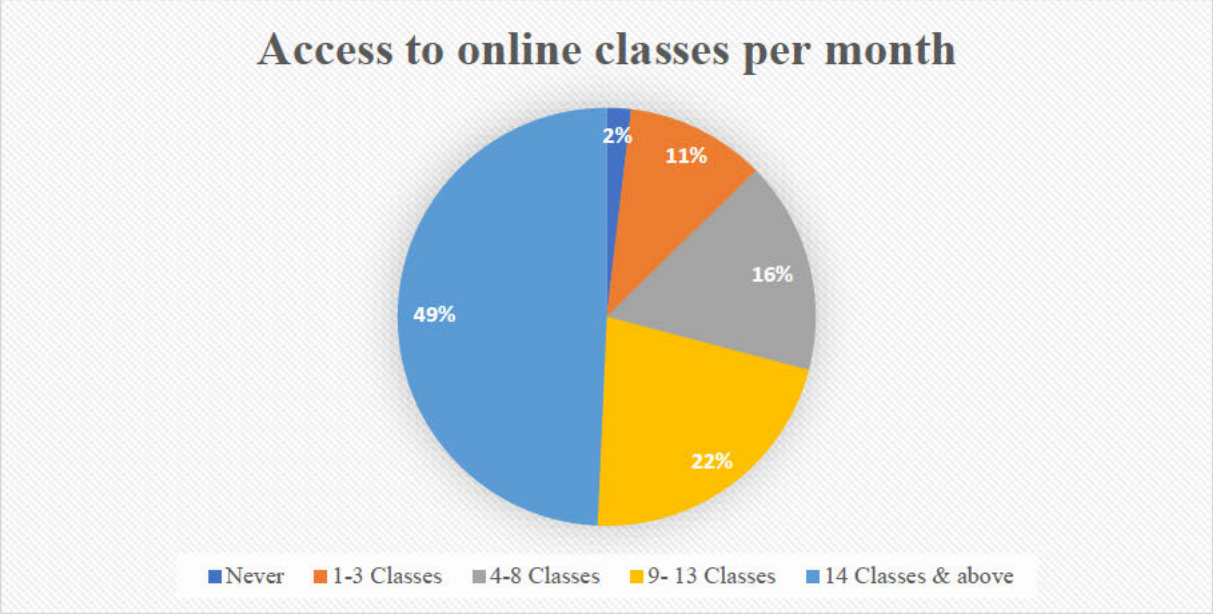
> Participant Eleven [African]: "*You know for me, I prefer online because, you are flexible when to attend and you can do other tasks unlike when we are all in classroom. I think the data provided assisted me but I did not need much because there was also Wi-Fi at home. The family support and being around family made things easy for me when it came to my studies*"

While Participant Four [African] stated:

> "*… With online learning I struggled with first network issues, I remember one time we lost electricity and I have to go all the way to the nearest shopping centre for me to take a test online, and those environments are noisy, it made me hate(for a lack of a better term) learning, this is not a separate case, because of network even when I had to participate in the class I would be breaking down so people would not hear me properly and this was really discouraging… at time I ran out of the data that was provided because we had so many zoom classes*."

As evident above, affordability concerns were a significant barrier; even with access to devices, data costs posed a major challenge. Studies such as those conducted by Moonasamy and Naidoo (2022) highlighted that data affordability was also a major concern in South African education. As a result of these concerns, students who prefer online learning may be forced to choose alternative methods due to financial constraints.

Access to Online Classes per month



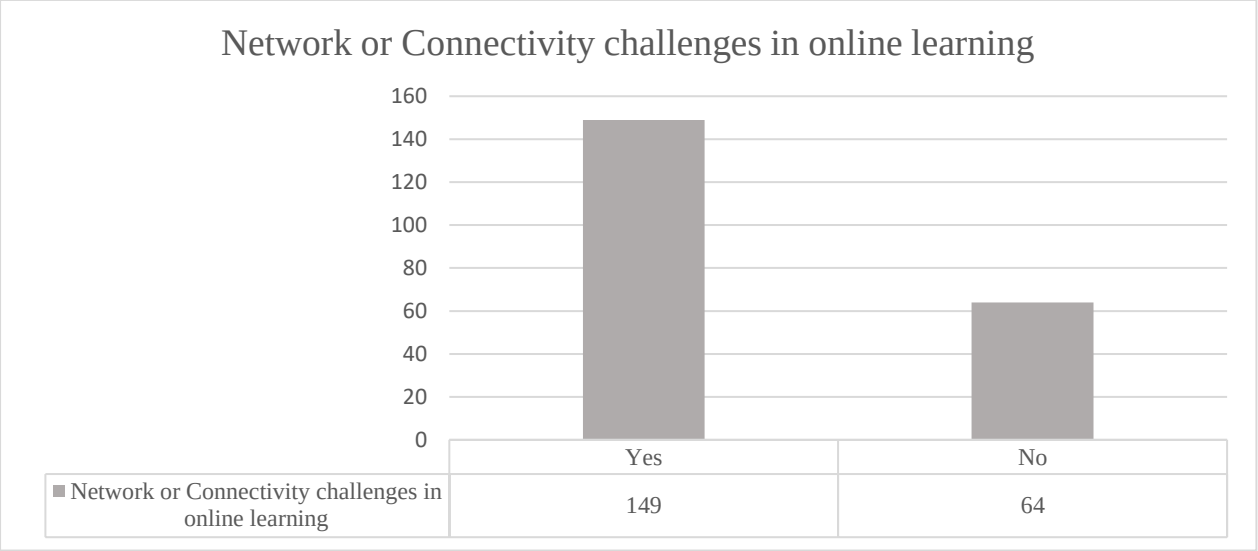
Graph 4: Access to online classes per month

The chart above shows the frequency with which the students accessed online platforms per month. The majority, 49.3%, accessed these platforms 14 times or more, indicating a high level of access. Additionally, 21.6% attended online classes fairly frequently, ranging from 9 to 13 times per month, while 16.4% attended between 4 to 8 times monthly. A smaller percentage, 10.8%, attended 1 to 3 classes per month, and a negligible 1.9% never accessed online platforms. These results demonstrate a wide range of engagement levels with online learning platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a significant portion of the participants actively utilising these platforms.

Consistent with the above results, scholars such as Mhlanga (2021) argued that South Africa made significant progress in fast-tracking the Fourth Industrial Revolution in higher learning, with the COVID-19 pandemic serving as a key driver. However, this progress was not without limitations. It is important to note that access does not necessarily equate to active participation. In this context, studies such as Dube (2020); Mhlanga and Moloi (2020) argued that some students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, found online

learning as exclusionary and not conducive to enhancing their learning due to the challenges they faced.

Network or Connectivity Challenges



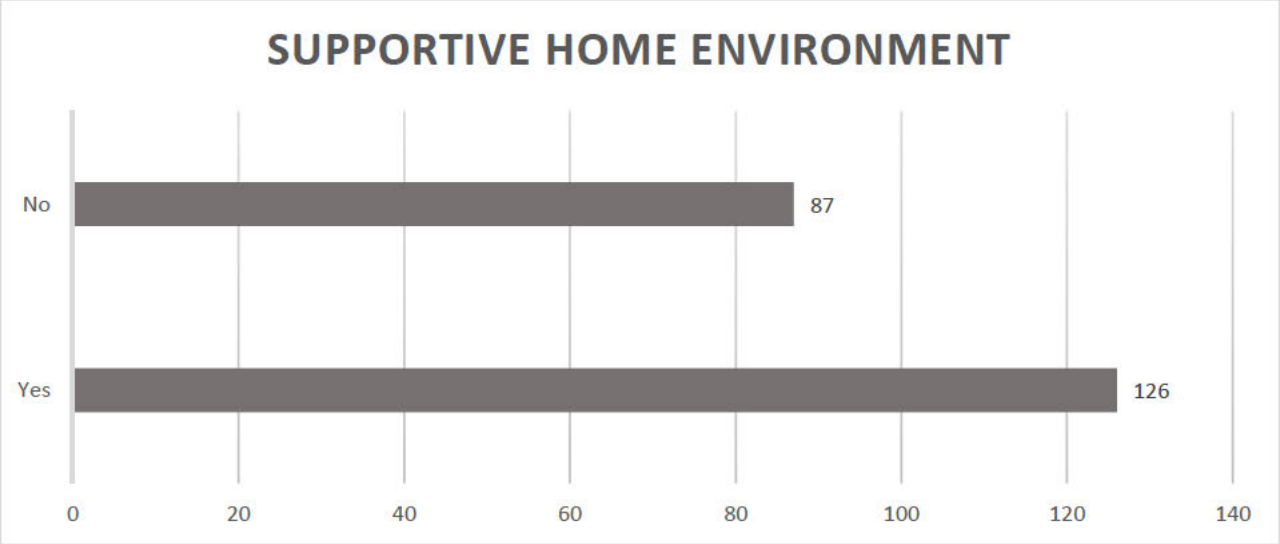
Graph 5: Network or Connectivity Challenges

The above results highlight a prevalent issue of network or connectivity challenges in online learning among the sampled group of students, with 70.0% (n=149) reporting having faced these challenges. The excerpt from Participant Four above also indicates network issues, some of which are caused by structural issues such as load shedding (power outages). Scholars such as Tamrat and Teferra (2020) note that while 24% of Africa has internet access, poor connectivity, frequent electricity outages and cost-related challenges remain significant barriers. However, South Africa has made significant progress in addressing these issues (Mhlanga, 2021), as evidenced by the number of students who were able to access online learning. Despite this progress, some participants still faced challenges in accessing and engaging with online learning.

South Africa continues to grapple with various structural and systemic challenges that affect the learning experiences of many students. The implications of these are significant, as connectivity issues can disrupt the learning process, leading to frustration, disengagement,

and unequal access to educational opportunities (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020). While On the other hand, 30.0% (n=64) of respondents did not encounter network or connectivity challenges, indicating smoother online learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need to address the concerns of the majority of students facing connectivity issues to ensure equitable access to online education and improve the overall quality of the learning experience. This is particularly important in an educational landscape that is becoming increasingly dependent on digital technologies, regardless of whether the learning method is online or blended.

Supportive Home Environment



Graph 6: Home environment

The results above reveal a significant divide within the sampled group regarding the presence of a supportive home environment. While 59.2% (n=87) reported having such an environment,40.8% (n=126) indicated the absence of support at home. The majority who reported having a supportive home environment benefitted from emotional, psychological, and practical support that contributed to their overall well-being and personal development. This result is consistent with the work of Sehlako et al. (2023) argued that these forms of support are particularly important in the context of the 4th industrial revolution in education.

Conversely, the substantial percentage of participants lacking such support may face challenges within their home environments, which could have implications for their emotional and psychological welfare. Recognising these disparities is crucial within institutions of higher learning, as there should be a clear consideration of the limited understanding of online learning within households, particularly in those who are still grappling with the realities of educational disparities in South Africa.

An excerpt from Participant Eleven highlights the importance of family support: "*…The family support and being around family made things easy for me when it came to my studies.*" In contrast, Participant Thirteen shared a different experience: "…*at home there was no understanding that I have to be in class even though everyone at home knew that I was registered at the university".* These contrasting experiences reflect the realities in South African societies nowadays. Yet, during the COVID-19 pandemic, universities utilised a blanket approach to dealing with these issues, which maintained exclusions already inherent in higher education.

Resources for Online Learning

Adequate resources for online learning		
	N	%
Yes	167	78.4%
No	46	21.6%

Table 4: Resources for online learning

The table above presents responses regarding the availability of adequate resources for online learning. Of the respondents, 78.4% (n=167) indicated having access to sufficient resources, while 21.6% (n=46) reported a lack of access to such resources. This division highlights that the majority of the sampled individuals have the necessary tools and materials to support

effective online learning. However, the presence of a minority who reported inadequate resources is noteworthy, as it points to inequalities in educational opportunities and access to technology within institutions of higher learning Furthermore, studies have indicated a general lack of resources facilitating to learning (Faloye and Ajayi, 2022). As demonstrated, this digital divide disproportionately disadvantages students from low-income backgrounds, hindering their access to social work education- a field inherently focused on social justice and equity, as emphasised by the International Federation of Social Workers (2018). This not only limits educational opportunities but also perpetuates existing social inequalities.

Device for Learning

Access device for online learning		
	N	%
No access to a device	5	2.3%
Laptop/Desktop	177	83.1%
Smartphone	31	14.6%

Table 5: Device for Learning

The above results reveal that within the sampled group, the majority of participants (83%) used a laptop or desktop computer to access learning, making these the most common devices used during this period. A significant proportion (15%) also has accessed learning through smartphones, while, a small proportion (2%) lacked access to any device. In South African higher learning institutions, the majority of students are National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) beneficiaries and are provided with learning devices upon enrolling at the university. This is also in line with the National Development Plan 2030, which aims to reduce inequalities in access to education.

However, studies such as those conducted by Faloye and Ajayi (2022) indicate that about 36% of students in KwaZulu-Natal only gain access to computers after

entering university. This access, however, is not clearly defined. Research by Thongsri et al. (2019) shows that prior access to devices impacts students' computer efficacy. Therefore, having access to a device does not necessarily equate to the knowledge or skills needed to effectively utilise it for learning.

In addition, the participants noted their reliance on smartphones for learning, which offered a certain level of accessibility. However, screen size limitations, and restricted software functionality compared to laptops/desktops can hinder the quality of education and active involvement in their own learning. Nyahodza and Higgs (2017) argued that access to technology goes beyond just having the hardware; it also encompasses affordability and the ability to effectively utilise it. These results are important in highlighting how students engaged with online learning, particularly considering the percentage of students who had no access to a device for learning.

5.4. Descriptive statistical results in relation to objectives and variables measured

While the socio-demographics of participants and their impact on learning experiences within a digitally divided country such as South Africa are important, it is crucial to present and analyse descriptive data. This study utilised scales to measure hypotheses in line with the research objectives. This chapter, therefore, presents a simple descriptive statistical analysis to lay the foundation for the subsequent chapters.

Measures of Central tendency (Mean) and Standard deviation on variables in the study

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Binary Scale on Use of Epistemological Dialogues (ED) during Online Learning (OL)	213	1,2352	,19817
Epistemological Dialogues (ED) & Critical Consciousness (CC) Scale	213	3,9394	,52731
Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC) Scale	213	4,2872	,39215
Transformative Critical Action (TCA) Scale	213	2,9628	,56588

Table 6: Measures of Central tendency and Standard deviation

The table above presents the statistics showing the central tendencies, specifically the mean and standard deviations, for the scales used for this study. The following are the analyses and interpretations of the results:

Binary Scale on Use of Epistemological Dialogues during Online Learning: the mean for this binary scale is 1.2352, indicating that the average value is slightly above 1. Suggesting that, on average, epistemological dialogues were somewhat used during online learning. The low standard deviation of 0.19817 indicates that the responses are relatively consistent around the mean. On the Epistemological dialogues & Critical Consciousness Likert scale, the mean was 3.9394, suggesting that, on average, participants perceived a moderate level of connection between epistemological dialogues and critical consciousness (the rigorous statistical tests are provided below). The standard deviation of 0.52731 indicates some variability in participants' perceptions, with some perceiving a stronger connection of epistemological dialogues with critical consciousness than others. The Transformative Critical Consciousness Likert scale had a mean of 4.2872, indicating that, on average, participants exhibited a relatively high level of transformative consciousness. The standard

deviation of 0.39215 suggests that responses are closely clustered around the mean, indicating a somewhat consistent level of transformative consciousness among participants. Furthermore, the Transformative critical action Likert scale had a mean of 2.9628 suggesting that, on average, participants exhibited a moderate level of transformative critical action. The standard deviation of 0.56588 indicates some variability in participants' levels of engagement in transformative critical action, with some individuals being more actively involved than others.

The above data suggest epistemological dialogues were generally utilised in online learning, with a moderate perceived connection between epistemological dialogues and critical consciousness. Additionally, Participants showed a relatively high-level transformative consciousness, while the level of transformative critical action was moderate. However, there is variability in participants' perceptions and behaviours within these dimensions, which were crucial to explore (qualitative findings provided an in-depth understanding of these dimensions). It is important to note that the statistics presented here are not definitive but are essential for understanding the characteristics of the variables and will be used for further analysis and interpretation of results in this study.

5.5. The Normality Tests of Variables in the study

The table below presents the normality test results for the variables in this study, tests for skewness and kurtosis were run on SPSS. Skewness and Kurtosis mitigate the shortcomings of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test & Shapiro-Wilk test and are particularly useful for both small and large sample sizes (Hae-Young Kim, 2013). The skewness values, along with their standard errors, provide insights into the asymmetry or symmetry of the data distribution. The kurtosis values, along with their standard errors, give information about the 'tailedness' of the distribution; the standard errors indicate the precision of these measurements.

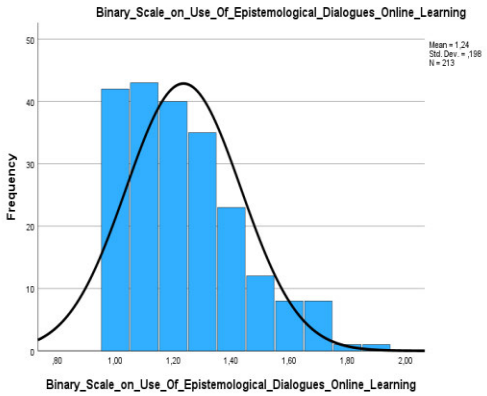
Below are the results:

	N	Sum	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Binary Scale on Use of Epistemological Dialogues (ED) during Online Learning	213	263,10	,824	,167	,203	,332
Epistemological Dialogues (ED) & Critical Consciousness (CC) Scale	213	839,10	-,676	,167	,918	,332
Transformative Consciousness (TCC) Scale	213	913,17	-,990	,167	3,582	,332
Transformative Critical Action (TCA) Scale	213	631,07	,131	,167	,085	,332

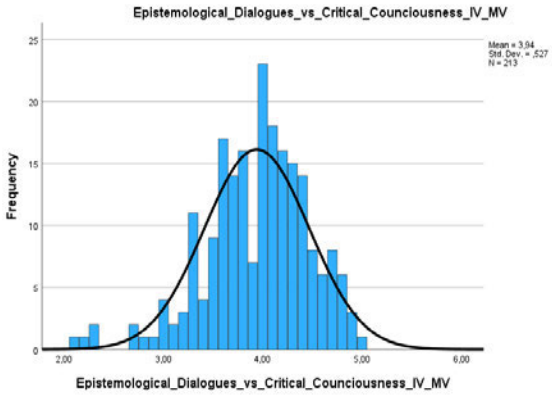
Table 7: Skewness and Kurtosis

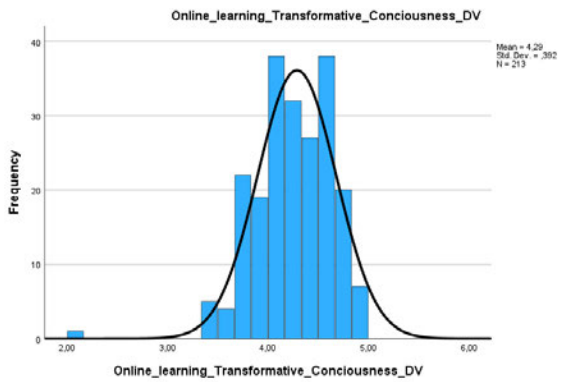
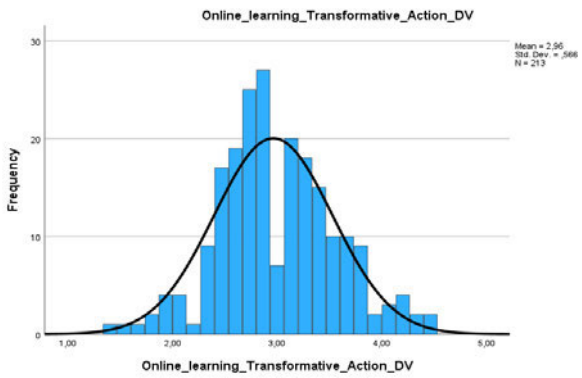
The descriptive statistics for Skewness and Kurtosis in the table above suggest that the variables in this study are normally distributed. However, there is a moderate level of variability in the data. Additionally, the graphic display of the normal distribution curve gives more insight into the results:

A. Binary Scale on Use of Epistemological Dialogues during Online Learning



B. Epistemological Dialogues & Critical Consciousness Scale



C. Transformative Consciousness Scale	D. Transformative Critical Action Scale
	

Graph 7: Normal distribution Curve Graphs

The skewness and kurtosis values for each variable indicate some deviations from a perfectly normal distribution, but the deviations are moderate. Smaller standard errors suggest more precise estimates. Lastly, while the distributions of the variables show some departure from normality based on skewness and kurtosis, the deviations are not extreme. As Hae-Young Kim (2013) argued, descriptive statistics alone cannot fully capture normality of the data. Therefore, the normal distribution curves provide a clearer picture by depicting where the values lie and the nature of the normality of variables. It is evident that the values center/lie around the mean depicting the normal distribution of variables in this study.

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter served as a foundational exploration of the intersection between sociodemographic factors and online learning experiences within South African social work education, particularly amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It provided a descriptive analysis of participant demographics and their implications for navigating the digital divide. By highlighting the sociodemographic landscape, this chapter shed light on challenges and opportunities encountered by social work students in accessing online education. Specifically, this chapter examined how sociodemographic characteristics intersect with online learning experiences, highlighting key considerations for addressing systemic

disparities. It accentuates the importance of understanding social backgrounds in shaping online learning dynamics, laying the groundwork for subsequent discussions on critical consciousness development and the role of epistemological dialogues. This foundational exploration sets the stage for a comprehensive analysis of online social work education in the chapters that follow, aiming to contribute to the understanding and potential advancement of emancipatory education within the South African context when online learning is used. Furthermore, this chapter presented simple descriptive statistics which also serve as the foundation for the chapters that follow.

Chapter Six

Results

Learning Through Dialogue: Student Experiences with use of Epistemological dialogues in Online Social Work Education during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa

6.1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant changes in the delivery of education in South Africa, particularly in social work education. With the shift to online learning, social work students had to adapt to this new learning environment. It is worth-noting that, the use of epistemological dialogues has proven to be an effective way for students to engage and learn within emancipatory social work education. Through epistemological dialogues, students engage with diverse perspectives, challenge assumptions, and develop their ability to advocate for social justice (Diemer et al., 2016). Moreover, these dialogues are essential for teaching and learning in social work education, as they help meet the key competencies required to address persistent socio-economic issues (CHE, 2015). However, it remained unknown how epistemological dialogues were facilitated during online learning in the South African context.

This chapter presents and discusses both quantitative and qualitative findings derived from social work students in this study. Specifically, it focuses on how these dialogues were used in online classes and the nature of social work learning during online learning. As discussed in the preceding chapter, this chapter adopts an integrated approach incorporating student voices to strengthen the quantitative results and provide a comprehensive picture of the findings. The chapter begins with a descriptive statistical analysis, using a binary scale (frequency and percentage) to measure the extent to which epistemological dialogues were

incorporated during online learning. It then presents bivariate results that show how epistemological dialogues relate to other variables measured in the study. Although the analysis is focused on descriptive statistics, it is further strengthened by citing descriptive data (i.e. mean) from the previous chapter. The qualitative analysis is grounded in critical discourse analysis. The focus of this chapter is on the first objective of the study i.e., to determine the extent to which epistemological dialogues were utilised and establish how these dialogues were used during online learning in social work education. Throughout the chapter, results are discussed, and the conclusion provides a summary of the key points emanating in this chapter.

6.2. Descriptive statistics on the extent to which epistemological dialogues were incorporated during online learning during online learning

The data below provides insight into the extent to which epistemological dialogues were incorporated during online learning, often presenting a dichotomy of perspective from students. This contrast is important as it gives a clear indication of how students conceptualised learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also raises questions about the implications of this contrast for emancipatory social work education. The following are the results:

Items	**Frequency (n)**		**Valid Percent (%)**	
	Yes	***No***	***Yes***	***No***
6. *During online learning, we had debates about social, economic, and political issues*	156	57	73.2	26.8
7. *During online learning, we engage in dialogues about current affairs*	162	51	76.1	23.9
8. *During online learning, we had discussions about the taught subject matters*	185	28	86.9	13.1
9. *During online learning, we participated in our learning (asking and answering questions)*	199	14	93.4	6.6

10. *Online learning provided a space for us to reflect on our history and experiences*	155	58	72.8	27.2
11. *Online learning provided us an opportunity to critically review current issues in South Africa*	171	42	80.3	18.7
12. *During online learning, we used videos to learn and we were able to engage and analyses these*	177	36	83.1	16.9
13. *During online learning assessment used required us to critically engage and apply theory and practice*	167	46	78.4	21.6
14. *Online learning promotes student-teacher collaboration (Collaborative learning)*	144	69	67.6	32.4
15. *Online learning education is centered on the teacher*	105	108	49.3	50.7
16. *Online learning education is centered on students*	118	95	55.4	44.6

Table 8: Descriptive statistics on the binary scale

Contrary to what is known about the challenges that may hinder online learning in facilitating learning, the data above shows that overall, there was an incorporation of epistemological dialogues during online learning, as reflected on different scale items. For instance, the data reveals high participation rates in discussions on various topics (subject matter, current affairs, video analysis), ranging from 72.8% to 86.9%. In addition, 78.4% of participants reported engaging critically with assessments. However, the perception of online learning as either teacher-centred (50.7%) or student-centred (55.4%) highlights a dialectical tension between instructional authority and learner autonomy. Furthermore, the contrast in responses across each scale item demonstrates the diverse students' perspectives. For example, when asked whether there was critical engagement and application of theory into practice (Praxis), 78,4% responded affirmatively, while 21,6% disagreed. Although the majority of students viewed online learning positively, the minority perspective is equally important. Perhaps the minority gives more tasks of critical reflection and evaluation, urging the author to consider the nature of the epistemological dialogues during online learning.

On one hand, while participation rates may be high, this does not necessarily translate into the quality of epistemological dialogues. Scholars such as Rapanta et al. (2023) argued that the quality of dialogues or dialectic learning, shifts perspectives more than mere

participation. These dialogues necessitate a deeper level of critical reflection on knowledge itself, requiring students to question assumptions, analyse evidence objectively, and explore alternative perspectives (Freire, 1970). This is also the case with assessments, for example, were the assessments primarily multiple-choice or memorisation-based, or did they require students to analyse, synthesize, or evaluate information? Therefore, critical reflection on the nature of the epistemological dialogues incorporated during online learning is essential.

6.3. Bivariate Analysis

Correlation between Epistemological Dialogues (ED) and Variables (Online learning [OL], Transformative critical consciousness [TCC], Transformative critical action [TCA]) in the study

The data in the previous chapter suggest that the data used across variables has the characteristics of a normal distribution, this, therefore, suggests the paramedic nature of the variables measured in the study entirely. As such, a Pearson correlation was run to determine the relationship among the central variables in the study. However, in this section, the focus is on the correlation between ED and other central variables (OL; TCC; TCA) measured in the study. According to Gilchrist and Samuels (2014), Pearson Correlation is a paramedic test that measures the existence (given by a p-value) and strength (given by the coefficient r between -1 and +1) of a linear relationship between two variables. The point-biserial correlation used to measure relationships between binary and continuous variables was automatically computed by SPSS- Since the point-biserial correlation is simply the special case of the Pearson product-moment correlation applied to a dichotomous and a continuous variable, the coefficients produced by correlations are point-biserial correlations when these types of variables are involved (Luke, 2020).

Below are the correlation results:

Correlations

		Binary Scale on Use of ED during online learning	ED vs CC Scale	TCC Scale	TCA Scale
Binary Scale on Use of ED during online learning	Pearson Correlation	1	-,174*	-,069	-,132
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,011	,316	,054
	N	213	213	213	213
ED vs CC Scale	Pearson Correlation	-,174*	1	,266**	,332**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,011		<,001	<,001
	N	213	213	213	213

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 9: Pearson Correlation

Most relationships are significant at the 0.01 level (90%) confidence interval, however, this study assumed a 0.05 (95%) confidence interval. The analysis below is based on the assumed confidence interval:

The results above show that the relationship between online learning and the use of epistemological dialogues is significant [p<.011]. Therefore, this study rejects the null hypothesis. Although though a correlation exists, the relationship is weak and inverse. In the context of this study, this could mean a few things i.e., limited evidence of epistemological dialogues, or the quality of epistemological dialogues was not up to the expected standard, thus creating the inverse relationship between online learning and the use of epistemological dialogues. Furthermore, the relationship between the use of epistemological dialogues and the development of critical consciousness is significant: (Transformative Critical Consciousness [p<.0266]; Transformative Critical Action [p<.0332]), this is unpacked further under Chapter 8. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. These results are particularly important as they are consistent with the argument that epistemological dialogues serve as a vehicle for the development of critical consciousness.

6.4. Epistemological Dialogues (ED): The Nature and the Extent of utilisation in Online Social Work Education

The descriptive statistical analysis shows that epistemological dialogues were incorporated during online learning. Across the items on the binary Likert scale, 76,76% of participants indicated that these were included. The mean score on the binary Likert scale for the incorporation of epistemological dialogues during online learning is above average (1.2352), indicating evidence of the inclusion of ED in online learning. This highlights the potential of online learning to offer transformative experiences in social work education. However, various factors such as the quality of the epistemological dialogues should be critically reflected upon.The qualitative findings show that while the incorporation of epistemological dialogues was evident, it was mostly limited to the classroom context (online classes), where lecturers played a central role in learning. The reflections of participants show that these hardly extended beyond the confines of the classroom and even when they did, they were presented with difficulties. The researcher unpacks this theme further in the subthemes below.

The integration of Epistemological Dialogues in Social Work Education

The integration of epistemological dialogues within social work education was presented with both challenges and opportunities. The participants shared the following regarding the incorporation of epistemological dialogues in social work online education during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> Participant Ten: *"As students, some of us are lazy, you know. So, having online classes, it is easy from your bed…it is then difficult as a social work student because most of our work needs interactions."*

Participant One: *"…having discussions or debates outside the classroom was extremely difficult. I could say, it almost did not happen and we even encountered challenges when we had to do group work, but everyone was trying but it was difficult".*

Participant Three*: "So just like last year, it was, it was very rocky for us, especially on social work classes, because, you know, people were scared to unmute and talk and stuff like that."*

In the above excerpts, it is clear that there was an opportunity to explore the online method and assess how it can be used within a South African context but there were evident challenges that significantly impacted both the lecturers and students. It is crucial to note that the argument here is not about the abolition of online learning in South Africa but rather about for the consideration of the broader picture when incorporating online learning in education, especially given the challenges it presents in a South African context. The participants' reflections above reveal that online classes, while convenient, foster disengagement and laziness, directly conflicting with the interaction intensive nature of social work training. Additionally, logistical difficulties in facilitating discussions and group work, combined with psychological barriers such as fear of speaking up, further obstructed meaningful engagement. Phrases such as "*everyone was trying but it was difficult"* reveal that despite the efforts made, the challenges persisted, indicating a disconnect between the intent to engage and the actual opportunities to do so. This reflects the limitations of online learning environments in replicating the dynamic and interactive nature of in-person discussions. It is important to note that, in-person discussions are not without their own limitations, with the power dynamics being a key factor affecting the quality of the discussions. To further understand these points, the participants were probed to reflect more deeply on the nature of

the epistemological dialogues they engaged in. Their responses shared similar sentiments, and the following are the reflections of one participant:

> Participant One: *"Well, considering the module that I was doing during the semester, social work… it was sometimes debates, and we would share life experiences concerning the context and reflect on everything. So, it always depended. It was us answering questions, discussing, debating, and like linking learning with our backgrounds such as growing up in such a household. …. following some things for you to be okay while growing up and adjust to the society stuff. So, it was about the past, also answering questions, debate, which was really nice"*

Participants identified, debates, questions and answers, and discussions as evident during online social work classes. One participant argued that despite the challenges associated with online learning, this highlights the transformative potential of this method, notwithstanding that the quality of epistemological dialogues may be compromised. Consistently, Ali (2023) argued that online learning has a transformative potential in overcoming education disparities; however, this is not without limitation, especially in the South African Context (Makhanya and Mfishi, 2023; Dube, 2020). Further unpacking the participants' reflections, one participant employed phrases such as "*following some things for you to be okay*" and "*adjusting to society.*" These expressions suggest an awareness of intersectionality and an understanding of the complex interplay between individual experiences and broader societal structures. On the contrary, this also points to a passive student role, where the education system prepares students to merely adjust rather than confront and dismantle strong societal boundaries. Consistent with this, Turton and Schmid (2020) argued that social work education that overlooks the contributing factor of social structures is inappropriate and ineffective because education should be transformative.

Therefore, the role of epistemological dialogues is tailored towards achieving this active role in learning.

Differing Views on Engagement Levels in Online Social Work Education

Among the sampled participants, there were varied perspectives on the level of engagement during online social work classes. Engagement, in this case, is viewed as a student's ability to be actively involved in the learning process. The findings indicate differing views on the level of engagement and the extent to which engagements were happening during online learning in social work education. Some participants expressed the following:

> Participant Two: *"Ah I feel like even though, you do respond, or you do engage, but you are not engaging fully, as much as you can, you know."*
>
> Participant Eleven: *"So, for us online learning was limiting us to, basically have engagements with one another, you know, have discussions or debates that would help us learn on how to, to navigate in this field of social work, where you need to speak be able to speak in, in a very assertive way, meaning good communication skills. So, online learning was not really, really not teaching us that, you know."*

The participants above viewed engagement as being fully realized in a face-to-face setting rather than in the online environment. Numerous studies, conducted in different parts of the world, such as the one by Simic et al. (2022) in Serbia, have shown that students were much involved in face-to-face than in online classes. Therefore, the assertions made by the participants above, are not different as they state that they can gain more skills in face-to-face than in online classes. However, this does not dismiss the evidence of epistemological dialogues and their value during online classes. In this regard, one participant stated the following:

Participant Three: *"But like, when we had dialogues and classroom and question-answer sessions, it was great. I thought it was it was very beneficial. Because we got to know everyone's opinions, everyone's views, there were times when we all did not agree on a certain aspect or a certain topic, like we had different answers. And what that we got to, we got to learn like someone else's perspective, which is great, because with social work, it is not a one-way road, you need to understand everyone's perspectives and everyone's background and their views and why such why they feel a certain way. So yeah, I think that that helps a lot, especially with our with my degree."*

The participant highlights the value of epistemological dialogues, in their utterance, this was the nature of the epistemological dialogues that occurred during online learning. The value attached to such dialogues is that they also allow one to build a professional identity, for example, the participants mentioned that even when they do not agree, they developed a different perspective. This process is essential for the development of metacognition among social work students. Scholars such as Björktomta and Tham (2024) expand on this point by emphasising the value of reflective writing for social work students. This emphasis highlights the importance of reflections and discussions in social work education.

Based on the above subthemes, it is crucial to note that while the potential of online learning for use of epistemological dialogues is evident, it is essential to recognise the challenges and complexities inherent in digital pedagogy (Hodges et al., 2020). Some scholars have cautioned against simplistic assumptions about the effectiveness of online dialogue, emphasising the need for deliberate design and facilitation strategies to promote meaningful engagement and critical reflection. Hodges et al. (2020) further highlight the importance of addressing equity issues and socio-cultural factors that may influence students' participation and voice in online learning environments.

6.5. Lecturer centred pedagogical approaches on the use of epistemological dialogues in Online Social Work Classes

The current study provides evidence of epistemological dialogues being employed in online social work classes. A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant relationship ($p < .011$) between online learning and the use of epistemological dialogues. However, this relationship was found to be negative (-.174). The significant correlation found in this study points towards a potential interaction between the online learning environment and the way epistemological dialogues are implemented. Descriptive statistics from this study further support this notion. Nevertheless, while, the epistemological dialogues were reported to be evident, their incorporation was to a certain extent. Furthermore, participants identified that the approach to which these dialogues were facilitated was largely lecture-centred because without the lecturer, very few students would take an active initiative to engage during online social work classes and even beyond. The following subthemes explore the findings further

Hotseat Participation during Social Work Online classes

The findings of this study reveal a need for lecturers to incorporate methods such as the 'Hotseat' participatory approach to incorporate and facilitate epistemological dialogues during online social work classes. However, this study argues that relying primarily on this method promotes a 'banking' model of education. For truly emancipatory social work education, lecturers should facilitate discussions, but the Hotseat should not be the main method used nor should it be the expectation of student. The following are the reflections of the participants:

> Participant Ten: *"…when attending a lecture online, and you have never been on campus, you expect the lecturer to visualize the PowerPoint. And then if they were to read a point on their slides, they should elaborate it further and not just read it out*

loud. So, their responsibility is to read probably what is there and then explain it more, even give examples, wherever possible. And ask questions if we do understand, and then probably ask us how we would use it in future reference, or if we would engage in any situation other than that, not to just hear us say, Yes, we do understand, and then just take it from there and move forward."

The participant above reflects on what learning means to them, with phrases such as *"not to just hear us say, 'Yes' we do understand and then take it from there move forward,"* highlighting students' dependency on the lecturer to probe for further discussion. The above participant also shared that the Lecturer should explain more and give examples, indicating how students viewed the role of the lecturer during online classes. In this case, a "banking" model of education as described by Freire (1970) is evident. However, it is important to note that this is not an issue unique to online learning; it also appears in face-to-face discussions. For example, a study conducted by Sempe (2020), showed that students relied on lecturers for aspects such as attendance or attainment of basic psychological needs. While this study is not in the domain of social work, it speaks to a broader trend in student perceptions of learning across various domains.

In addition to the above, another participant added the following reflections pertaining to the role of the lecturer in online classes:

Participant Twelve: *"…when it came to like, the lecturers asking us questions, most of the time, there were students that were scared, so we had to be placed in like, you know, like the hot seat where they like, told certain students to unmute and talk."*

Similar to Participant Ten's experience, the lecturers had to use the "Hotseat" approach to encourage students to engage in during online classes. Shabrina (2018) argued that the "Hotseat" method was effective for critical skills and knowledge development in

education. However, the researcher in this study refutes this claim and maintains that this is a passive learning method, especially for students in higher education. This deliberation is not without consideration of cultural context as well as the role of language and student confidence.

Power Dynamics: Envisioned face-to-face classes versus Online social work classes

The results revealed contradicting views on whether education was student-centred or lecturer-centred. While 49.3% of participants felt it was lecturer-centred, 55.4% indicated it was student-centred. This contrast in views highlights the power dynamics in online social work classrooms. The qualitative data provided additional insights that may help explain this dichotomy of perspectives. Participant Three added a different dimension to the reflections shared above:

> Participant Three: *"I think like, even if we have to go back to campus, it is still going to be the same, like you are still going to get your regulars that are going to be answering questions, and you know, actively participating. And the rest are obviously going to be quieter and more reserved and be placed in the hot seat. It works the same way. I do not think it is just a learning method or a learning style."*

This participant highlights the assumed position of students in physical classes. It is important to note that this participant only had an online learning experience within higher education but her perspective is vital in understanding how students might position themselves in different learning contexts. This raises important questions about whether the tendency to be passive is due to the cultural context, language issues, confidence, socialisation, or even internalised oppression within the South African Context. Literature shows that the learning method and style are crucial in social work education therefore these factors cannot be discarded or disregarded (Frantz, 2017).

The participants further revealed that learner-centred education was notably limited during online learning, which is crucial, especially in the quest for student-centred education. The following are the excerpts from the participants:

> Participant Ten: *"Online learning is a disadvantage when it comes to that (engagement with other colleagues) we do not really interact with other colleagues as much as I think we would on campus."*

> Participant four: *"I think if the Lecturer were not there to give us activities we were not going to interact with out class mates. If I remember, we tried to have a WhatsApp group but few individuals in my group were participating or wanted to participant till we reported to the Lecturer of the module."*

These reflections reveal the difficulties students faced in taking initiative in their learning without the involvement of their lecturers. The power that the lecturers hold is also revealed in words such as *'reported to the lecturer'* before students can participate. Sidky (2017) argued that power dynamics in education depend on three factors: students' expectations, institutions' expectations, and teachers' perceptions of their roles. However, the researcher in this study argues that the assumed expectations and roles by the student and lecturers alike, during online learning call for a shift in perspective. These power dynamics undermine the student-centred approach and active engagement that students should be encouraged to assume in their learning. On one hand, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a paradigm shift in education, requiring more self-directed learning and adaptability from both lecturers and students. Alam et al. (2022) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to changes in various aspects of the education system, including the curriculum, syllabus, assessment methods, teaching methods, and learning methods. The concerns raised about the preparedness of both lecturers and students illustrate how education

during online learning was viewed and regarded as lecturer-centred. The struggle to replicate the depth of face-to-face interactions in online learning further highlights the challenges of devising online pedagogy that not only maintains '*academic rigour*' but also cultivates the interpersonal skills essential for disciplines such as social work. The author in this study further maintains that while face-to-face is not immune to power dynamics, the university systems and structures often perpetuate the oppression of the disadvantaged, despite the efforts made to address past disparities.

6.6. Student Engagement and Participation during online Social Work Education:

Quantitative data on participation metrics, such as discussion participation (85.9%) and question-and-answer participation (93.4%) suggests a high level of student engagement in online classes. However, qualitative analysis reveals a different perspective. While participation was present, it was often limited to a select few students. This limited participation in epistemological dialogues during the pandemic highlights the complex dynamics at play in adopting online pedagogy in South Africa during COVID-19. The difficulties stem from multifaceted challenges within the South African context, as evidenced by research from Makhanya & Mfishi (2023) Dube (2020), Weeden & Cornwell (2020), and Kajiita et al. (2020). These challenges limit online engagement. Participants reported that the online environment posed a significant barrier to active participation for many students, leading to a decrease in synchronous engagement. The following are the excerpts of the participants:

> Participant fourteen: *"…the thing is, I feel like the people that participate are the same names every time."*

Participant nine: *"... it was usually the same people, meaning it is the same students that you will find participating, but there are certain students that are with us, but they have never said a thing. During lectures as so for me, that is a problem on its own, because, in this profession, I think you need to be able to talk we need to hear you either way. So honestly, this participation was just for the sake of, you know, proceeding with learning but there are some people that did not even say a word."*

These reflections revealed that there was no value attached to participation or engagement in the epistemological dialogues. As such there was ineffective participation in online classes which participants identified as uneven, with only a few students actively engaging. This created an unfair learning environment and limited opportunities for peer-to-peer learning as well as enhanced discussions. This inequitable participation distribution raises concerns about the quality of learning for all students and the effectiveness of online platforms in fostering collaborative learning. Several factors contributed to the limited participation, such as motivation to learn, which was found to influence participation by scholars such as Basar, et al. (2021). In addition, one should not be oblivious to challenges alluded to by different scholars within a South African context such as technical skills (both the lecturer and students), structural challenges, and inequalities which could be key barriers to effective online participation.

Despite lecturers' efforts to foster engagement, some students remained inactive. One of the participants provided the following example:

Participant Twelve: *"I will give an example that happened in class recently, not recently, like during our time when we were having online classes. Students would be joined on the class, you know, like, logged in on Zoom. But when it came time to answer questions or participate, the Lecturer would be calling names but nothing and*

they would not be responding. Why? Because they are not there. They probably just logged on and went back to sleep."

While numerous challenges have been identified within the South African context, some were orchestrated by the students. Factors such as willingness to learn, understanding of online etiquette as well as the pedagogy, played a significant role in this disengagement. Scholars such as Weeden and Cornwell (2020) questioned the adoption of online learning pedagogy in South Africa. Additionally, Barbour et al., (2020) argued that the successful implementation of online learning should be guided by the principles of the method, its pedagogy, and methodology. This suggests that some of the challenges could have been alleviated if the processes of online learning and pedagogical guidelines had been followed more effectively. The above assertions are a course for concern in social work education especially where students are central to their learning and for their development.

"Zoom was just like a video call with the Lecturers": Challenges with Technology-Mediated Epistemological Dialogues

The quantitative findings indicated that videos were used for learning and critical analysis purposes (83,1% agreeing and only 16,9% disagreeing). This a high number showing the potential and ability of online learning method to use videos to advance learning but the qualitative findings indicate that this was not without challenges. The qualitative findings indicate that both students and lecturers were not upskilled to engage in technology-mediated dialogues. The lack of technical skills and understanding of the etiquette of online learning and its pedagogy were identified as major barriers. For example, the participants indicated videos were often used merely as awareness tools rather than for discussions, and only a few lecturers engaged in this task. Participants also indicated that only pre-recorded videos were uploaded and *"nothing beyond that".* Below are the reflections of the participants:

Participant Two: *"I think there was an issue, she was struggling to really put the video for us. I do not know, there were so many technical issues and challenges and yes, amongst each other, even students who were watching the video, would struggle…like I said, it is not really that effective sometimes there is a technical problem, does not have enough sound, or the sound is not there, there are just those technical errors that take place."*

Participant Four: *"To me the challenges to participate where due to load shedding and I did not have enough network. But for others, they would be distracted because of noise and others not muting so, at times it was a mess…Also, on my side, when I transitioned from high school to University I had never had a laptop in my life, so it took time to adjust…I do not want to mention this thing of meeting on Zoom, Zoom was just like a video call with the lecturers and we talked with them at the same time it was difficult and stressful because we had to adapt"*

While technology facilitated continuity in learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, it accentuated the difficulties faced by both students and lectures. This is consistent with scholars such as Hlatshwayo (2021); and Dube (2020) who noted the prevalent challenges in technical skills among social work students and lectures. The digital divide, which was already a pervasive issue, was further exacerbated, magnifying existing inequities (Makhanya & Mfishi, 2023; Mpungose, 2020). All this impeded the participation of a considerable portion of students in epistemological dialogues during the synchronous online classes. For others, the challenges inhibited their ability to fully engage in classes. The virtue of emancipatory social work education requires beyond just watching the videos; it also requires engaging in higher cognitive functions, analysis, and reflections to develop critical consciousness. IFSW (2014) places social work within a critically engaged paradigm, as such, the development of critical consciousness is instrumental for social work students. If

such challenges are evident then what is the state of critical consciousness among social work students in online learning? – The subsequent chapters unpack the findings on this critical question.

6.7. Conclusion

This chapter presented a comprehensive analysis of the impact of online learning on the use of epistemological dialogues in social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data (grounded in descriptive statistics and discourse analysis), this chapter provided a detailed and well-informed understanding of the research objective (one). While there was evidence of the use of epistemological dialogues during online learning, there were also underlying issues that need to be addressed. The bivariate results revealed a significant correlation between epistemological dialogues and development of critical consciousness (TCC & TCA) showing that the dialogues have the potential to foster transformative learning (this is discussed further in the following chapters). However, the challenges highlighted by students, such as passive learning behaviours and technological barriers, indicate that the full potential of these dialogues was not realised during online learning in social work.

The author asserts that, the reliance on lecturer-centred pedagogical approaches, as indicated by the qualitative data, necessitate a need for a pedagogical, and methodological shift towards more student-centred approaches. This shift is essential for fostering cognitive justice, especially in emancipatory social work education. Furthermore, the development of critical consciousness in social work education requires intentional and strategic integration of epistemological dialogues that go beyond mere participation to foster deep, transformative learning experiences. This chapter thus provides a more nuanced understanding on how epistemological dialogues were facilitated or hindered by the online learning method, while

also considering the role played by the students, lecturers, and the entire education system in South Africa.

Chapter Seven

Results

Unveiling the Development of Critical Consciousness Among Students in Online Social Work Education During the COVID-19 pandemic

7.1. Introduction

Critical consciousness is essential in social work education, particularly in contexts marked by historical and systemic inequalities. According to Frank et al. (2022), the fundamental goal of social work education is to enhance the development of students' critical consciousness by encouraging reflections on structural sources of poverty, oppression and/or privilege, on the basis of criteria such as race, class, language, religion, gender, disability, culture and sexual orientation, and developing action strategies towards addressing structural and personal barriers. Within an integrated approach, this chapter critically analyses the development of critical consciousness among social work students at a South African university during the COVID-19 pandemic based on the study data.

This chapter focuses primarily on objective two of this study, i.e. to determine the extent to which social work students developed critical consciousness (i.e., TCC and TCA) and to explore the impact of online learning on this development. The chapter begins by outlining the integrated findings, presenting joint display tables to synthesise the quantitative and qualitative data. It then expands on these findings in detail incorporating inferential statistics alongside emerging qualitative findings under each test; this establishes a clear connection between the results in this chapter. The chapter concludes with a discussion and summary of the findings, providing insights that contribute to the global discourse on social work education during times of crisis.

7.2. Integrated Findings on the Development of Critical Consciousness Amongst Social Work Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This study shows that critical consciousness is instrumental in social work education. This section presents the integrated findings from the data obtained in this study. Unlike Chapter 6, which primarily focused on narrative integration this chapter presents integrated results through joint displays. It is important to note that the former is also evident in this chapter. This section further discusses the impact of online learning on the development of critical consciousness (TCC and TCA).

7.3. Joint displays table:

The table below gives an overview of the integrated results addressing the second research question: To what extent did social work students develop critical consciousness (i.e. TCC and TCA) and what is the impact of online learning on the development of critical consciousness?

Quantitative Results	Qualitative Theme/s	Explanation	Illustrative Quote/s
76.76% of students indicated evidence of epistemological dialogues (ED) during online learning. Specifically, 73.2% indicated participation in debates about social, economic, and political issues, 76.1% engagement in dialogues about current affairs, and 80.3% felt that online learning provided opportunities to critically analyse issues in South Africa. The transformative critical consciousness (TCC) Likert scale showed a mean score of 4.2872 with a standard deviation of 0.39215, indicating a high and consistent level of transformative consciousness among students. In contrast, the transformative critical action (TCA) Likert scale had a mean score of 2.9628 and a standard deviation of 0.56588, suggesting a moderate and more variable level of critical action.	Reflections on reflective experiences during online classes	The theme provides contextual insights that complement the descriptive findings of challenges and adaptations in online learning. It enriches understanding by delving into participants' experiences, offering in-dept perspectives on the limitations of online reflective practices and the efforts made to overcome them. It also highlights the complexities of ensuring critical consciousness in online environments and identifies gaps between experiences and quantitative results.	Participant Six, remarked, "*During online learning, we had zoom chats which we used if and when the lecturers required us to reflect maybe about personal experiences about the topics we learned but it was different because it lacked a physical presence. Basically, it lacked the closeness that was there during face-to-face discussions."*
The correlation analysis is as follows: There is no significant relationship between online learning and the development of TCC [P = 0.316] or TCA [P = 0.054]. However, the use of	Social action versus online limitations: advocacy role among social work students	The theme aids in interpreting the bivariate relationships by providing insights into the factors influencing students' engagement in advocacy efforts. It elucidates the challenges students faced in participating in social action online, such as feelings of inadequacy and limited skills. These qualitative findings complement the	Participant Three stated: "*No, I do not think I am equipped enough. Yes, I do have the voice for it. Yes, I can stand up and speak against it. I can, I can approach the situation. But I do not*

ED during online learning is significantly positively correlated with both TCC ($r = 0.266$, $P < 0.001$) and TCA ($r = 0.332$, $P < 0.001$) [see chapter 8]. Additionally, TCC and TCA are significantly correlated with each other ($r = 0.184$, $P = 0.007$). These results suggest that while online learning alone does not significantly impact TCC or TCA, the incorporation of ED during online learning is associated with higher levels of both TCC and TCA.		bivariate results by offering a deeper understanding of the barriers that may contribute to the lack of statistical significance observed in the relationships between online learning and TCC or TCA.	*think I have the proper skills needed to actually, you know, deal with the situation. Because, of course, like, it is just been online learning and we have learned the skills online, and we have not actually practiced it or tested them. We have not, you know, been face to face and had like a scenario where we have to physically approach the situation. So, no, I do not think I am not equipped or even confident enough. Because honestly, I do not actually know how to handle the situation… I do not think I am ready for that."*
	Praxis in social work education through online Learning	The theme clarifies the challenges encountered by social work students in applying theoretical knowledge to real-world scenarios during online learning. This understanding is in line with the bivariate results, which demonstrate no significant relationship between online learning and the development of TCC or TCA. The qualitative insights emphasize the importance of practical engagement in social work education, noting that the absence of such opportunities during online learning directly contributes to the observed lack of significant correlation between online learning and TCC or TCA. Therefore, the qualitative theme offers crucial context for comprehending the bivariate findings.	Participant Five expressed, *"It is a major concern. Applying theoretical knowledge directly with clients in social work. Online group work and case work we get to do not have the same feel or experience…We will be graduating without the confidence and practical skills we need to navigate out there in the real world. It feels like 'ukuyolwa ungakaze uye empini' (to fight injustices without ever touching the battlefield), I mean we have never been exposed to fighting or challenging any injustice which is why I foresee difficulties."*
The linear regression analysis reveals that online learning does not significantly predict the development of TCC or TCA. For TCC, the correlation coefficient ($R = 0.069$) is very weak, and the R^2 value of 0.005 indicates that only 0.5% of the variance in TCC is explained by online learning. The p-value (0.316) is greater than 0.05, indicating that the predictor is not	Student Agency during online learning amongst social work students	The theme sheds light on the complex interplay of factors influencing the outcome variable in the regression analysis, particularly in terms of student agency during online learning in social work education. By examining the experiences and perspectives of students, the qualitative inquiry reveals the nuanced dynamics at play, such as individual preferences, language barriers, and cultural identity. These qualitative insights provide a contextual understanding of how these factors influence students' engagement and participation in online learning environments, which in turn can impact the development of TCC and TCA. For instance, students' reluctance to	Participant Twelve reflected: "*The truth is that most students do not want to participate… I think at some point I posted the poster which had the details of engagement online, thinking my mates would join but the majority of students did not join. It is a fact that this is what is happening, you will see that attendance is very, very low. So, this just proves that sometimes, not even it is*

statistically significant. Similarly, for TCA, the correlation coefficient (R = 0.132) is weak, and the R^2 value of 0.018 suggests that only 1.8% of the variance in TCA is explained by online learning. The p-value (0.054) is slightly above 0.05, again indicating a lack of statistical significance. The ANOVA results supports these results. For TCC, the F statistic of 1.010 with a p-value of 0.316 shows that the regression model is not significant. The sum of squares for regression (0.155) is very small compared to the residual sum of squares (32.446), indicating that online learning does not account for much variability in TCC. For TCA, the F statistic of 3.764 with a p-value of 0.054 similarly indicates an insignificant regression model, with the regression sum of squares (1.190) being small relative to the residual sum of squares (66.697).		participate due to language barriers or discomfort with assimilating into dominant cultural norms may hinder their active engagement in online learning, thereby affecting the predictive power of online learning in the regression model. Therefore, by elucidating the socio-cultural factors shaping student agency in online education, this qualitative theme enriches the interpretation of the regression results, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between online learning and the outcome variables.	*a reality that people are not interested in, into having engagement online. So, it will be just certain people, and definitely, those people are those people that you know, that oh, okay, I know this one and others you have to invite them personally but it is not enough. This was something that I thought resonated with social work students, the program was about assisting the LGBQI community in the university because of the lack of support they get, assisting them to fight for their rights. But it did not work even when I personally invited them, emailed, and texted them. So, we ended up cancelling the event because the majority of students were not joining*"
	"They would rather just listen": Passive Learning Tendencies during Online Classes	The theme provides valuable context for interpreting the results of the linear regression and ANOVA analyses. Despite statistical testing indicating weak correlations between online learning and the development of TCC and TCA, the qualitative data uncovers underlying reasons for these results. Participants expressed reluctance to actively engage in online discussions and challenge assumptions, preferring instead to passively receive information. This reluctance aligns with the small effect sizes and non-significant p-values observed in the regression analysis, indicating that online learning may not significantly predict the development of TCC and TCA. Similarly, the ANOVA results further support these findings by showing insignificant regression models, suggesting that online learning does not account for much variability in TCC and TCA. Therefore, this qualitative theme enriches understanding by elucidating the challenges of passive learning tendencies in online classrooms, which may contribute to the observed weak correlations and lack of predictive power of online learning on TCC and TCA	Participant Eight: expressed that "*Not every student wants to actually participate...some just do not want to participate or refuse to, you can even see that they intentionally log out of zoom when they are called upon to participate."* While Participant Fifteen stated: "*...I believe they could be benefiting from participating rather than just listening to the Lecturer and a few others who try to participate. But they would rather just listen, maybe it is their personal choice but I do not think it benefits them."*

Table 10: Joint Displays Table

NB: The results are interrelated and might cut across one or two themes. The integrated results above are discussed in detail below.

7.4. Inferential Results:

The inferential results provide an integrated approach to understanding the statistical significance of the results and the extent to which the researcher may draw valid conclusions from this research. After critically analysing the data and drawing inferences, this section presents descriptive statistics, bivariate, and multivariate analysis results, integrated with qualitative findings.

7.4.1. Descriptive Statistical results

The results showed evidence of ED (76,76%) during online learning, indicating that students know different sociological issues even though they learned online. For example, they reported the following in these areas*: During online education, we had debates about social, economic, and political issues* (73,2%); *During online learning, we engage in dialogues about current affairs* (76,1%); and *Online learning provided us with an opportunity to critically review current issues in South Africa* (80,3 %).

In addition, the transformative Critical Consciousness Likert scale had a mean of 4.2872, indicating that participants exhibited a relatively high level of transformative consciousness, but this can be due to other factors, such as the use of ED. The standard deviation of 0.39215 suggests that responses were clustered relatively closely around the mean, indicating a consistent level of transformative consciousness among participants. However, the Transformative Critical Action Likert scale had a mean score of 2.9628, indicating that, on average, participants exhibited a moderate level of TCA. The standard deviation of 0.56588 indicates some variability in participants' levels of engagement in TCA, with some individuals more actively involved than others, as reflected in the qualitative findings. Although the descriptive results indicate TCC and TCA, they are insufficient for

drawing inferences; for example, the direct relationship between online learning and TCC or TCA cannot be drawn. Therefore, more rigorous statistical tests are necessary.

Reflections on Reflective Experiences during Online classes

Reflections and reflective learning play a crucial role in social work emancipatory education. The findings suggest that while reflections were evident to a certain extent, they required adjustments to align with online learning methods. Limitations and barriers were noted, particularly in reflective learning, which is vital for fostering critical consciousness among social work students within the South African context. The following are the accounts of the participants:

> Participant Six: *"During online learning, we had zoom chats which we used if and when the lecturers required us to reflect maybe about personal experiences about the topics we learned but it was different because it lacked a physical presence. Basically, it lacked the closeness that was there during face-to-face discussions. Some lecturers tried but you could see that this was not working"*

Participants Nine and One shared similar views with the above:

> Participant Nine: *"Sharing personal stories online was challenging; there was a sense of lack of connection, empathy, and support that you would feel when you are around other students. I mean there was just no 'brotherhood', I do not know how to explain this, we just did not connect."*
>
> Participant One: *"It was very difficult to tell our personal stories because first I did not know my class mates, I had only met them during online classes. Even outside class we just meet via WhatsApp for groupwork only after that we never talk. Even when we met on Zoom as a group we just still to tasks and nothing more, remember we were also struggling with data because it was not enough to start talking about our lives. So, I was scared to reflect when it came to class because of not knowing*

people. It was strange and initially, I thought maybe this is the life in university. This is how we are supposed to learn…"

While the above reflections are generally dominated by challenges, it is important to recognize the adaptations and adjustments noted by some of the participants. For example, Participant Six mentioned the use of *"Zoom chats"* as an adaptation to engage in reflective learning, suggesting that both lecturers and students made efforts to adjust to the online learning environment through the use of alternative means to make learning interactive during this period. Further evident in the findings is that the shift to online learning altered the dynamics of reflective experiences. The absence of physical presence affected the depth and nature of reflective practices among social work students, whether in the online class or in group work engagements. This detachment influenced the openness and depth of reflective experiences, hindering the transformative potential of such practices (reflections in learning). Consistent with the above, Hlatshwayo (2021) noted that challenges in the online learning environment, such as 'distance', contribute to ineffective learning. Similarly, Gogu and Kumar (2021) found a lack of connectedness during online learning.

Freire (1970) elaborated on the value of a teacher-student relationship to enhance learning. The exigent circumstances surrounding the transition to online learning during the COVID-19 exacerbated pre-existing challenges in fostering genuine student reflection, potentially compromising the efficacy of reflective learning as a pedagogical tool for the development of critical consciousness. Flem et al. (2023) argued that critical consciousness must begin with the self; without 'honest' self-reflection and reflective practices during online learning this is difficult to attain. Additionally, the participants highlighted the role of support and empathy in reflective learning, which they deemed to bring connection among students. This is especially important in reflective learning, as it connects personal experience (historical, cultural, and religious) with learning content.

7.4.2. Bivariate Analysis

Correlation between critical consciousness and other variables in this study:

This section aims to correlate critical consciousness with other central variables to ascertain the significance of the relationships. Below are the correlation results:

Correlations

		Binary Scale on Use of ED during online learning	ED & CC Scale	TCC Scale	TCA Scale
TCC Scale	Pearson Correlation	-,069	,266**	1	,184**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,316	<,001		,007
	N	213	213	213	213
TCA Scale	Pearson Correlation	-,132	,332**	,184**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,054	<,001	,007	
	N	213	213	213	213

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 11: Pearson Correlation

The results show that there is no significant relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness in terms of TCC [P = 0.316]. As such, the null hypothesis is retained for this relationship. Similarly, the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness in terms of TCA [P = 0.054] also shows no significant relationship, leading to the retention of the null hypothesis.

The Pearson correlation results show the relationship and the level of association between online learning and critical consciousness (TCC and TCA). Notably, there are differences in the relationship between online learning and the development of TCC and the relationship between online learning and the development of TCA. The results suggest that online learning may have a slightly varying impact on TCC development compared to TCA development. Establishing a direct relationship between these variables is key within a South

African context, particularly for social work education, when online learning was employed as a teaching and learning method during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Praxis in Social Work Education Through Online Learning

Praxis is defined as 'reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed,' with a focus on 'reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action' (Freire, 1970 cited in Flem et al., pg. 579). In relation to the above quantitative results, qualitative findings highlight praxis through the dichotomy between theoretical understanding and practical application. The challenge faced by social work students in bridging the gap between theory and real-world application is central here. The absence of hands-on experience impedes the cultivation of practical skills necessary for effective social work practice, raising concerns about the development of TCA during online learning in South Africa. Social interaction and confidence are regarded as paramount for praxis and the development of critical consciousness. The following are the accounts of the participants:

> Participant Six: *"…you cannot really apply much of what you are learning until you get into the field or practice in group work, but now that is not possible, we are learning online, and even when we do group work we are not confident… for me, it would be difficult to even challenge people on societal issues and that is scary, you know"*
>
> Participant Five: *"It is a major concern. Applying theoretical knowledge directly with clients in social work. Online group work and case work we get to do not have the same feel or experience…We will be graduating without the confidence and practical skills we need to navigate out there in the real world. It feels like "ukuyolwa ungakaze uye empini" (to fight injustices without ever touching the battlefield), I mean we have*

never been exposed to fighting or challenging any injustice which is why I foresee difficulties."

Participant Seven: *"Like, for example, in … (*name of the module excluded*) we do not have lectures. It is a self-study module, we are just given notes on the Learn (Learning management system), learn website, and then you study on your own and then you are given a test you answer yabo (you see). So, it might be a disadvantage for others not being able to, because when, when writing the test, it needs you to be able to apply those theories. So, for others, it might be difficult to apply them without being explained verbally or discussed in class. So, I can positively and confidently say that is a disadvantage, that we do not have the Zoom Lectures…"*

The participants above highlight the lack of practical engagement as a challenge to applying theoretical knowledge into practice. Some modules were identified as not having online classes, which participants felt would have been instrumental in fostering praxis in test scenarios. Lack of confidence comes up as a barrier to the application of theoretical knowledge in practice. This is a concern in fields that need practical application of knowledge, Hashemiparast et al. (2019) argued that praxis required professional support, and experience bridging the simulated situations with real-life scenarios. This is problematic for modules without support during online learning in South Africa. The participants further indicated that the preparations, such as online group work or case work, were insufficient, as they did not offer 'the same experience' as they would in practice. In a similar study conducted by Nel and Pretorius (2019), it was found that real work skills are essential even for employability, but students found them challenging to attain within the higher education curriculum.

Nonetheless, the findings above are particularly noteworthy in the context of the praxis-critical consciousness nexus. While participants demonstrated awareness of societal

issues and a commitment to social justice, their ability to translate this awareness into transformative action appears limited by a deficit in confidence. Tlhaku (2023) asserted that confidence played a pivotal role among social work students in South Africa when translating skills into practice, and many students who learned during the COVID-19 pandemic lacked such confidence. In addition to the above reflections, one participant further shared the following:

> Participant Five: *"…for example, there was a rise in gender-based violence during lockdown, families were deep in poverty especially those who are informal traders. I knew about this but there was nothing I could do. I did not know where to start… as a social work student, it was painful because I know no one deserves to be beaten or to sleep on an empty stomach, I was helpless. Even worse there was no one I could interact with because we were learning online and everyone was trying to survive. Above all, we do not have enough skill or confidence to challenge these things"*

While the above highlights challenges in engaging in advocacy, the participant raises challenges with collaborative work in praxis due to a lack of social interactions during online learning in social work. Furthermore, the emphasis is placed on the challenge of discussing these issues without the hands-on experience of field placements or configuration of the online platforms used during the COVID-19 pandemic to simulate the field experience the students would get if they were learning face-to-face. As such praxis was hindered during online learning, manifesting in feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. Freire (1970) stated that there is a need to challenge social structures especially inequalities. In this context, the findings reveal that moving social work students on a continuum from TCC to TCA was undermined by these challenges.

The gap between academic learning and field application is pronounced, raising questions about the efficacy of online education in promoting praxis. The tension unveiled

between praxis and online learning, particularly the dichotomy between theoretical understanding and practical implementation, highlights a significant concern. As such there is a need for pedagogical strategies that bridge this gap, ensuring that online education facilitates the development of practical skills alongside theoretical knowledge in social work education and within fields in applied human sciences.

Social Action Versus Online limitations: Advocacy role among Social Work Students

Social action and advocacy are two interrelated aspects of emancipatory social work. Over the years, social action has been regarded as an important intervention strategy in social work, especially at a community level (Weyers et al., 2011). It serves as one of the vehicles for facilitating advocacy roles held by social work practitioners and students. The findings revealed that, for the majority of the students, there were constraints in participating in social action or any advocacy work while learning online. The participants were asked about efforts to engage in online movements aimed at addressing and/or challenging injustices. The following are the reflections of the participants:

> Participant Three: *No, I do not think I am equipped enough. Yes, I do have the voice for it. Yes, I can stand up and speak against it. I can, I can approach the situation. But I do not think I have the proper skills needed to actually, you know, deal with the situation. Because, of course, like, it is just been online learning and we have learned the skills online, and we have not actually practiced it or tested them. We have not, you know, been face to face and had like a scenario where we have to physically approach the situation. So, no, I do not think I am not equipped or even confident enough. Because honestly, I do not actually know how to handle the situation… I do not think I am ready for that."*

Participant Five: *"No, I mean, we have not actually engaged in any campaign or protest of some sort for social justice or awareness. Come to think about it, that has not occurred, I really have not engaged in a movement not even online. I have seen petitions signed but I did not think it was important or it was going to contribute to any change. It was just studying, passing and that was it for me, nothing else…(silence). I mean, personally, I have not engaged in protests or any other thing for justice."*

In the reflections of participants above, it is evident that some have not taken part in any advocacy or social action role while learning online. This placed them at an inability to confront or challenge injustices in their everyday lives. Phrases such as "*No, I do not think I am equipped enough. Because honestly, I do not actually know how to [would] handle the situation…"* reflect self-doubt, a passive position assumed by students, and the limited application of the social work skills learned during online learning. These reflections raise concerns about the effectiveness of online learning in preparing social work students to be active agents who undertake advocacy and challenge social injustices within a South African context. Furthermore, Participant Five stated: "*I have seen petitions signed but I did not think it was important or it was going to contribute to any change. It was just studying, passing and that was it for me, nothing else…(silence)."* This quote shows the limitations of online learning in fostering a comprehensive understanding and analysis of social issues. These are some of the challenges proclaimed by Mkhanya and Mkhanya (2023) of historically disadvantaged students who often lack the mechanism to challenge systems or injustices because they have been oppressed by the system. The findings of this study conform such limitations, as online learning seems too reinforce passivity in confronting social issues.

One key moment of self-reflection during the interview, particularly in the phrase and changes in tones and pauses, which could be attributed to the participants realising that they

had not contributed to any movement, even online; the Participant Five's reflection, *"Come to think about it, that has not occurred, I really have not engaged in a movement not even online",* clearly a moment of realisation for the participant. In addition, Participant Seven asserted phrases such as *"I feel like I had an experience of being excluded because of online learning, and this feels like I had limited your capacity to participate in movement or even to critically reflect about what was happening".* This quote further illuminates how online learning environments can unintentionally contribute to the exclusion of students, hindering their capacity for critical reflection and participation (Mfishi & Makhanya, 2023; Hlatshwayo, 2021). These reflections are crucial when positioning social work emancipatory education within the context of online learning. They reveal the passive position assumed by students while learning online limited participation in advocacy and a sense of exclusion. This, in turn, poses a significant challenge to achieving TCA.

Within social work education, critical consciousness is an essential component of praxis- integrating theoretical knowledge with practice. The researcher contends that the exercise of TCA, in dismantling social injustices, should be rooted in ethical and professional conduct, ensuring that there is adherence to professional codes of ethics. Additionally, demonstrating cultural competence is crucial. Furthermore, critical consciousness is intricately linked to policy and legislation competencies; as social workers and students alike engage in policy advocacy to challenge systemic barriers and promote social justice, this should be realised.

7.4.3. Multivariate Analysis

Linear Regression

The model below shows whether online learning predicts development of TCC:

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	,069[a]	,005	,000	,39214	,005	1,010	1	211	,316

a. Predictors: Online Learning

Table 12: OL and TCC linear regression model Summary

The correlation coefficient (R = 0.069) is weak, indicating a negligible relationship between online learning and the development of TCC. The R^2 value of 0.005 indicates that only 0.5% of the variance in the dependent variable is explained by the predictor, which is extremely low. The p-value (Sig. F Change = 0.316) is greater than 0.05, implying that the predictor is not statistically significant. Therefore, the study fails to reject the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between the predictor and the dependent variable.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	,155	1	,155	1,010	,316[b]
	Residual	32,446	211	,154		
	Total	32,602	212			

a. Dependent Variable: Transformative critical consciousness (TCC)

b. Predictors: (Constant), Online Learning

Table 13: OL and TCC ANOVA

The F statistic of 1.010, with a p-value of 0.316, indicates that the regression model is not statistically significant. This means that the predictor variable (OL) does not significantly

explain the variability in the dependent variable (TCC). Additionally, the sum of squares for regression (0.155) is very small compared to the sum of squares for residual (32.446), further reinforcing that the predictor variable does not account for much of the variability in the dependent variable.

The model below shows whether Online learning predict development of transformative critical Action (TCA):

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	,132[a]	,018	,013	,56223	,018	3,764	1	211	,054

a. Predictors: Online Learning

Table 14: OL and TCA linear regression model summary

The correlation coefficient (R = 0.132) above, indicates a weak relationship between OL and TCA. The R^2 value of 0.018 suggests that only 1.8% of the variance in the dependent variable (TCA) is explained by the predictor (OL), which is low. The p-value (Sig. F Change = 0.054) is above 0.05, indicating that the predictor is not statistically significant. Therefore, the study fails to reject the null hypothesis at the 0.05 significance level, suggesting that there is no significant relationship between OL and TCA.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1,190	1	1,190	3,764	,054[b]
	Residual	66,697	211	,316		
	Total	67,887	212			

a. Dependent Variable: Transformative Critical Action (TCA)

b. Predictors: (Constant), Online Learning

Table 15: OL and TCA ANOVA

The F statistic of 3.764, with a p-value of 0.54 in the table above, indicates that the regression model is not statistically significant. This means that the predictor variable (OL) does not

significantly explain the variability in the dependent variable (TCA). The sum of squares for regression (1.190) is very small compared to the sum of squares for residual (66.697), further suggesting the model does not explain a statistically significant amount of the variance in the dependent variable.

The ANOVA results for TCA and TCC align with the results from the Model Summaries tables (linear regression). Both indicate that OL does not significantly predict the development of TCC and that of TCA among social work students. The p-values of 0.316 and 0.54 suggest that the predictor variable does not have a significant impact on the dependent variables, reinforcing the conclusion that other factors may be more influential in this context.

These results could be attributed to various factors, one being the design of online learning. The online learning environment might not have been conducive to fostering critical thinking skills. Weeden and Cornwell (2020) argued that the incorporation of online learning in South Africa was to save the calendar year, but the methodology and pedagogy were not implemented. The researcher argues that effective online learning for critical consciousness development may require strategies such as participatory discussions, collaborative work that challenge assumptions, and exposure to diverse perspectives elements that might have been absent in the studied format on its own.

"They would rather just listen": Passive Learning Tendencies during Online Classes

The findings in this study consistently highlight challenges in fostering critical consciousness through online learning. The participants described several challenges in participating using the online learning method. What was of concern among the participants was the absence of face-to-face interactions, which was perceived as limiting social work students from fully engaging. This was also believed to lead to student not having a voice in their learning, instead becoming passive receivers. This has high implications for the development of critical

consciousness among social work students during online learning. The quantitative results indicated an insignificant relationship between TCC (p=0.316) and TCA (p=0.54), with a low predictive role in the linear regression model (OL and TCC: R^2 =0.005) and (OL and TCA: R^2 = 0.018). These results align with the qualitative accounts of participants below:

> Participant Four: *"Online discussions lack the depth or richness (if I may say) of face-to-face interactions that we would have in classes before COVID-19...I think some of the students in our class were holding back their opinions or not participating fully, it was for the sake of participating."*
>
> Participant Eight: *"Not every student wants to actually participate...some just do not want to participate or refuse to, you can even see that they intentionally log out of zoom when they are called upon to participate."*
>
> Participant Fifteen: "*...I believe they could be benefiting from participating rather than just listening to the Lecturer and a few others who try to participate. But they would rather just listen, maybe it is their personal choice but I do not think it benefits them."*

The participants above give accounts of challenges faced online learning in fostering the development of critical consciousness. Learning during this time was characterised by passivity. Freire (1970) warned against the "banking model" of education, where students are simply passive receivers. However, the participants in this study highlight the preferences among some students for passive learning by *'simply listening to lectures*.' This suggests a potential reluctance or discomfort with active participation, raising questions about the development of critical thinking. Samson (2018) argues that critical thinking/ consciousness is multidimensional, influenced by epistemology, understanding, and pedagogy. As such, students with limited understanding of the latter are less likely to see the value of active

participation in classes. In light of these findings, the researcher posed the following question during the interviews: "If they do not want to participate in the class discussions, what does it say about their development of critical thinking?" The following are the reflections of the participants:

> Participant Fifteen: *"I think it could be limiting because all the will do is just study, listen, and not have an opinion and that can be a disadvantage because they do not develop…"*
>
> Participant Ten: *"… when you do not participate it means, you do not even get the confidence to go out and look out for more, to even want more information on any other thing, now you do not develop as us who participate yet we are in the same class."*

The participants above expressed concerns about the limitations to confidence if and when students do not actively engage. The lack of open discussions limits the students from seeking additional information and exploring diverse perspectives, restricting their ability to challenge and broaden their understanding and critical think abilities. In this case, the students are unable to challenge [taken for granted] assumptions (Giroux, 2011), articulate their viewpoints, learn from their peers, or contribute to a dynamic learning environment. Gonzalez et al. (2019) argued that social work online environments often lack student enthusiasm, which can be attributed to the design of the social work online classes. He suggests a flipped classroom design to counter this challenge. However, the potential impact on participation and the development of critical thinking depends upon the skills of the instructor (lecturers) regarding the online learning pedagogy and methodology. The researcher argues that by embedding critical consciousness into the curriculum, social work lecturers can ensure that social work students are equipped with the necessary skills and

knowledge to understand and address the complex social issues they would encounter in their professional practice. However, this should begin with the education provided to students, as the response of students to that education is of importance.

Student Agency during Online Learning amongst Social Work Students

Student agency is an essential aspect of TCA and social work emancipatory education (Nomdo, 2023). Student agency reflects the extent to which students have developed critical consciousness (TCA). The following are the reflections of the participants:

> *Participant Two: "…Not all students. And as I said previously, it is based on the student's willingness to participate, because in social work, like when you are placed in breakout rooms to discuss certain topics, not every student wants to actually participate. It is not because they do not understand the topic most of the time. But yes, some students do not understand the topical, or so. But some students just do not want to participate or refuse to…Let me give you an example. Not all students speak English. Okay. Me, for example, I do not speak isiZulu. Other students speak isiZulu, okay, so that is a big barrier. During the breakout rooms, students will refuse to participate in English, and they only want to talk in IsiZulu… They do not want to adhere to 'everybody' else's needs."*
>
> Participant Twelve: *"The truth is that most students do not want to participate… I think at some point I posted the poster which had the details of engagement online, thinking my mates would join but the majority of students did not join. It is a fact that this is what is happening, you will see that attendance is very, very low. So, this just proves that sometimes, not even it is a reality that people are not interested in, into having engagement online. So, it will be just certain people, and definitely, those people are those people that you know, that oh, okay, I know this one and others you*

have to invite them personally but it is not enough. This was something that I thought resonated with social work students, the program was about assisting the LGBQI community in the university because of the lack of support they get, assisting them to fight for their rights. But it did not work even when I personally invited them, emailed, and texted them. So, we ended up cancelling the event because the majority of students were not joining."

The reflections above highlight that student agency during online learning was governed by different factors. It shows that student agency is not solely determined by external factors, such as language barriers or institutional norms, but is also influenced by individual preferences and choices. Students may assert their agency by actively participating in discussions, choosing to communicate in their preferred language, or advocating for their needs (Isaacs, 2016). Therefore, as reflected, students' interests played a pivotal role in their agency during online learning. There was also a limitation to student-led initiatives and education, for example student-led advocacy initiatives were cancelled due to a lack of interest.

In relation to the above findings**,** it is critical to examine the power dynamics at play. The expectation of using English as the sole medium of communication in diverse classrooms reinforces a hierarchy where English fluency is the norm, marginalising students who are not comfortable speaking English. Flem et al. (2023) argued for critical self-reflection among social work students to understand their positionality- a concept Freire (1970) explored, highlighting the risk of the 'oppressed becoming the oppressor'. While the challenging of set norms and power dynamics was not particularly evident during online learning, the standpoint of the students to use their native language may be viewed as challenging the status quo. The researcher asserts that refusal to participate in English and insistence on speaking isiZulu points to resistance against assimilation into dominant cultural norms. This

resistance can be seen as a form of agency exercised by the *'marginalised'* against oppressive structures in higher education.

In addition to the above, the online learning environment was perceived as a barrier towards students' agency. The findings also reflect a lack of attendance, especially in socially relevant matters such as supporting and advocating for the rights of the LGBQI community at the university. This indicates a broader trend of disengagement from socially relevant issues within universities. It raises questions about the extent to which institutional frameworks and academic priorities align with students' interests, values, and agency in shaping their educational experiences. The researcher argues that the issues of low participation extend beyond mere disinterest, touching upon deeper societal and institutional barriers, which includes but are not limited to systemic inequalities, cultural norms, institutional policies, or structural limitations.

What is reflected above paints a picture of South Africa. Mkhanya (2021) and Mkhanya and Zibane (2020) argued that universities are the mirrors of society; issues of power, structural barriers, marginalisation, and misalignment of the university curricula with societal issues reflect the current state of South Africa. Hence, emancipatory education is seen as pivotal in social work education as social workers and students navigate such issues daily.

7.5. Conclusion

In the context of South Africa, the development of critical consciousness among social work students remains particularly significant due to the country's historical experiences of colonialism and apartheid. The CHE (2015) argued that these periods have profoundly influenced welfare service delivery and the history of social work. The transition from apartheid to democracy brought about significant changes in social welfare service delivery,

highlighting the need for critical consciousness among social workers to understand and address the lingering effects of these historical injustices. This study contends that the effectiveness of challenging historical injustices and inequalities lies in cultivating critical consciousness among social work students. Critical consciousness would, therefore, assist in redressing and addressing the multifaceted socio-economic and historical injustices within a country such as South Africa.

This chapter presented and discussed results on the development (or lack thereof) of critical consciousness, specifically TCC and TCA, during the use of online learning in social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of joint display tables provided a more comprehensive display and understanding of the results. What is evident in the results is that the development of critical consciousness during online learning showed no significant relationship, suggesting that online learning alone may not lead to the best outcomes in social work education in terms of critical consciousness. Instead, the approach and design of the learning environment are crucial. However, when epistemological dialogues are incorporated, the results shift, enhancing students' development of critical consciousness development to some extent. Chapter 8 presents the results and discusses this interplay between these variables further.

Chapter Eight

Results

The Role of Epistemological Dialogues in Developing Critical Consciousness in Online Learning During COVID-19 in South Africa.

8.1. Introduction

The primary objective of this chapter is to unpack the mediating role of epistemological dialogues (ED) in the relationship between online learning (OL) and the development of critical consciousness. Specifically, it aims to reveal how EDs facilitated the development of critical consciousness during online learning in South Africa, with particular attention to their impact on students' transformative learning experiences. Scholars such as Flem et al. (2023), Nomdo (2023), and Freire (1970) argued that EDs are pivotal in fostering critical consciousness by enabling students to critically engage with their socio-political contexts. Grounded in Freirean pedagogy and critical scholarship, this chapter unpacks the complex interplay between EDs and the development of critical consciousness, positioning education as a practice of freedom (Freire, 1970). Freire's perspective, which emphasises the transformative potential of education to provoke critical engagement with oppressive structures, is particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic intensified pre-existing educational inequalities, especially in applied fields like Social Work, where embodied and contextual practices were difficult to replicate online.

Employing a rigorous mixed-methods approach, this chapter integrates quantitative and qualitative data to critically assess the mediating roles of ED. The quantitative component includes correlation analysis to explore the relationships between central variables, multivariate regression to assess the mediating role of EDs on the OL-critical consciousness nexus using a linear logistic regression model, and mediation analysis through

the Process Macro mediation model to investigate both direct and indirect effects. The qualitative component, informed by critical discourse analysis, interrogates the power dynamics and ideological underpinnings embedded in the narratives of participants, offering a plausible interpretation that extends the quantitative findings.

The triangulation of these methods provides a comprehensive and multi-layered understanding of the data. The qualitative findings not only corroborate the quantitative results but also offer deeper insights into the subjective experiences of students, revealing the complexities of how critical consciousness is shaped in online spaces. To integrate these findings, this chapter employs a joint displays approach alongside narrative synthesis. It begins with bivariate analysis, proceeds to discuss emerging qualitative themes, advances to multivariate regression analysis, integrates qualitative insights, and culminates with a mediation analysis that synthesises both quantitative and qualitative findings. The chapter concludes by presenting a critical summary of the key findings, highlighting the broader theoretical and pedagogical implications for social work education in the South African context.

8.2. Joint Displays Table

The table below gives an overview of the integrated results addressing the third research question: What is the mediating role of epistemological dialogues on the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness, and how did epistemological dialogues contribute to critical consciousness during online learning in South Africa?

Quantitative Results	**Qualitative Theme/s**	**Explanation**	**Illustrative Quote/s**
Relationship between ED and TCC (Pearson correlation = 0.266, $p < 0.0266$) as well as between ED and TCA (Pearson correlation = 0.332, $p < 0.0332$). Relationship between OL and TCC (Pearson correlation = 0.316, $p > 0.05$) or between OL and TCA (Pearson correlation = 0.054, $p > 0.05$).	*Dialogical Learning and Collaborative Knowledge Construction in Social Work Education*	The theme sheds light on the bivariate findings by providing context to the significant positive correlations between ED, TCC and TCA. The qualitative data from participants reveal that engaging in dialogical learning activities, such as discussions and peer interactions, enhances their critical thinking and understanding of complex social issues. This aligns with the bivariate results, which show that ED significantly influences TCC and TCA, as active participation in dialogues promotes deeper reflection and critical analysis - crucial components of transformative learning. Conversely, the qualitative data also explain the lack of significant correlation between OL and TCC or TCA, as participants reported challenges with the quality and integration of dialogues online. These limitations hinder the full potential of online learning to foster transformative critical consciousness and action, thereby supporting the bivariate results that OL alone does not significantly impact these outcomes.	Participant Eight stated: "*I particularly loved when we were in the breakaway room because we could learn from each other. Even though it was somehow a challenge because others chose not to participate. The idea of learning from each other and discussing certain topics was great. I feel like I learn more when something is explained by other students…"*
TCC: the regression model with epistemological dialogues explains 7.1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.071$). The correlation coefficient ($R = 0.267$) indicates a moderate association, and the model is statistically significant with an F-change value of 8.062 ($p < 0.001$).	*Transformative Social Work Education*	The theme elucidates the role of epistemological dialogues in transformative social work education, complementing the results of the multivariate regression analysis. It highlights that engaging in dialogues through online class discussions and peer interactions is crucial in mediating the relationship between online learning and TCC and TCA. This aligns with the regression results, which show that epistemological dialogues significantly explain variations in TCC and TCA. While the regression analysis reveals	Participant Nine reflected: "*For me, during online classes, I think I participated more because I believe that when you participate, you are learning, and when you participate, sometimes you are being challenged by the lecturer and some students who*

TCA: the regression model shows a more substantial effect, with an R^2 of 0.116, explaining 11.6% of the variance. The correlation coefficient (R = 0.340) indicates a stronger association, and the model is statistically significant with an F-change value of 13.742 ($p < 0.001$).		that these dialogues account for only a modest portion of the variance, the qualitative insights offer context by emphasising that other factors also play a role in these outcomes. The significant F-change values from the regression analysis, indicating a meaningful contribution of epistemological dialogues to the model, are supported by qualitative evidence, which demonstrates that these dialogues enhance critical reflection and transformation.	*participate. So, when we are challenged, we develop. I ended up reconsidering some views I had, especially growing up in a township about women and gender-based violence because all I knew, for example, beating your girlfriend, gained you respect, it was all I knew. But those views now are changing…"*
TCC: the direct effect of OL on TCC is not significant (coefficient = -0.0464, p = 0.7290). However, when ED is introduced, it becomes apparent that OL impacts TCC indirectly through ED, with an indirect effect of -0.0902. The positive effect of ED on TCC is significant (coefficient = 0.1948, p = 0.0001), highlighting the mediating role of ED in enhancing the relationship between OL and TCC. The negative effect of OL on ED (coefficient = -0.4631, p = 0.0109) creates a curvilinear relationship, suggesting that while OL negatively impacts ED, ED still positively influences TCC. TCA: the direct effect of OL is also not significant (coefficient = -0.2199, p = 0.2440). The analysis shows a significant negative impact of OL on ED (coefficient = -0.4631, p = 0.0109). The indirect effect of OL on TCA through ED is -0.1582, demonstrating that ED mediates the relationship between OL and TCA. The positive effect of ED on TCA (coefficient = 0.3415, p = 0.0000) emphasises the importance of quality ED in improving the relationship between OL and TCA.	*Online Learning Barrier to the Development of Critical Consciousness*	The theme sheds light on the challenges that impact the efficacy of ED in mediating the relationship between OL and the development of TCC and TCA, aligning with the results of the Process Macro Mediation Analysis. It reveals that while ED is vital for ensuring TCC and TCA, practical issues such as dialogical resistance, discomfort with online discourse, and language barriers undermine this potential. These qualitative insights help explain why the mediation analysis showed a negative indirect effect of OL on TCC and TCA through ED. Specifically, the qualitative data supports the findings that online environments can exacerbate difficulties in facilitating effective ED, which is reflected in the regression analysis, where the mediation effects were less significant. The barriers identified in the qualitative theme elucidate the context behind the modest mediation effects reported in the study, highlighting that while ED has some impact, its effectiveness is constrained by the challenges inherent in online learning environments.	Participant Seven stated: *"I remember that during our discussion online, there were a few voices that could speak and really participate in class. For me, it was sometimes hard to jump in and share my thoughts or reflections on topics discussed. I ended up trying to use the chat to try and type by the time I finished typing out my response, the discussion had already moved on…"*

Table 16: Joint Displays table

8.3. Bivariate Analysis

The researcher conducted a Pearson correlation analysis to examine the direct relationship between Epistemological dialogues, Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC) and Transformative critical action (TCA) and the direct relationship between OL and the dependent variables (TCC & TCA). As shown/discussed? in the previous chapters, the correlation between epistemological dialogues and central variables is crucial for establishing direct relationships. early studies on mediation by Baron and Kenny (1986) deemed this an essential first step for researchers to determine the mediation effect amongst variables in a study. The table below presents the correlation among central variables in this chapter:

Variables	***OL and TCC***	***OL and TCA***	***ED and TCC***	***ED and TCA***
Pearson Correlation (*P-Value*)	,316	,054	,0266	,0332

Significant at 0.05

Table 16: Correlation

The results in the table above indicate a significant positive relationship between the use of ED and the development of critical consciousness on TCC and TCA. The evidence shows statistically significant p-values ($p < .0266$ for TCC and $p < .0332$ for TCA), indicating a low probability that the observed connection is due to chance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected as the variables have a significant relationship. The results imply that incorporating epistemological dialogues in learning may be essential for achieving critical consciousness. This is consistent with what the pioneer of Emancipatory pedagogy (Paulo Freire) suggested: the use of dialogue to empower learners to critically analyse their world and act for social justice (Freire, 1970).

The relationship between OL and the development of critical consciousness (TCC= $p>.316$) indicates no significant correlation, as such, the null hypothesis is retained. Similarly,

the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness (TCA=p>.054) shows no significant correlation, and the null hypothesis is also retained. This study indicates that there is a complex relationship between the OL, ED and the development of TCC as well as TCA. The results from the multivariate and the mediation analyses further dissert this relationship.

Dialogical Learning and Collaborative Knowledge Construction in Social Work Education

The relationship between dialogical learning and critical consciousness was also explored qualitatively. Freire (1970), argued that dialogical learning is one of the essential vehicles for achieving critical consciousness. The following are the findings:

> *Participant Fifteen: "… I think one of the advantages of participation is that I get to learn more. I became confident, and even when we grew up from primary to high school, we were always taught that there is no wrong answer. Speak out, so I think that always works, like, you are able to say it, and then your if corrected… you do not find it offensive, you learn. So, it is an advantage…I meant to say that you get to learn more, you get to be able to correct yourself, and you get to look at things from a different perspective. You open your eyes wider. You do not go only one way but you are able to take different paths*."
>
> Participant Eight: "*I particularly loved when we were in the breakaway room because we could learn from each other. Even though, it was somehow a challenge because others chose not to participate. The idea of learning from each other, and discussing certain topics was great. I feel like I learn more when something is explained by other students… I do not know how to put this, but it is easy to even seek clarity or disagree ending up debating. I remember this one time we were debating about abortion in*

class, and the class all of a sudden became alive, I think I got to understand more then."

The findings above show dialogical learning and collaborative knowledge construction in OL. These findings highlight the importance of dialogical learning, where students actively engage in dialogues and exchange ideas with their peers during online classes. This shows the value of collaborative learning experiences and aligns with the principles of dialogical learning, which emphasise the co-construction of knowledge through interaction and discourse among students. Similarly, Damşa and Ludvigsen (2016) found that in collaborative learning, the epistemic nature, the strategic uptake of concepts, collaboration based on shared insights, and constructive feedback, all of which appear as the most critical aspects for a successful co-construction process and this added value on the students learning. However, the researcher questions whether all forms of collaboration equally facilitate knowledge co-construction, noting that this might be limited by a number of factors, including but not limited to the digital divide, language disparities, power dynamics and varying levels of technological literacy.

The findings above warrant a critical examination through multiple lenses. Participant Fifteen's phrase, '*if corrected',* reveals an implicit hierarchical structure that contradicts the apparent '*no wrong answer'* philosophy in critical pedagogy. The researcher argues that these appear superficially empowering, suggesting a potentially problematic oversimplification of knowledge construction. Additionally, these implicitly acknowledge an underlying power dynamic, where certain actors retain the authority to determine correctness, contradicting the notion of dialogical equality. This reflects what Brookfield (2005) terms the "hidden curriculum," where seemingly democratic educational practices obscure power relations. This further reveals pedagogical contradictions; the participant's internalisation of the '*no wrong answer'* ideology while simultaneously recognizing the need for correction highlights what

Ellsworth (1989) and Chinyowa (2015) describe as the 'repressive myths' of critical pedagogy. These myths are deemed as creating the illusion of liberation while reinforcing the oppressive educational structures (Chinyowa, 2015).

On a positive note, the above findings emphasize the value of student participation in dialogues during OL, suggesting that diverse perspectives contribute to a broader understanding. Debates that are central to epistemological dialogues are viewed as contributing to collaborative knowledge construction within social work education. However, it is crucial to contextualise this finding within the framework of South African higher education, where educational practices frequently perpetuate existing inequalities. Critical questions regarding the nature of these debates, their focus areas, and whose views are dominant, need to be scrutinised. Who has the power to shape these debates, and whose voices remain marginalised?

The study finds that although there is evidence of limitations concerning learning online, there was also a communal aspect where students exchanged ideas, engaged in collective discussion, and learned from each other. Nevertheless, this communal learning occurs within broader structures of power and privilege that influence who can participate fully and how their contributions are valued. Thus, the shared knowledge-building process becomes a vital substance for developing critical consciousness, especially transformative critical consciousness, though the path to such transformation is complex and often contradictory.

Participants deemed peer-to-peer learning fundamental. For example, Participant Eight stated, "*I feel like I learn more when something is explained by other students,"* highlighting that peer-to-peer learning is instrumental in social work education and practice. The use of epistemological dialogue/discourse-led education significantly contributes towards this aspect. However, critically examining the assumptions underlying this preference is

crucial. Hooks (1994) argued that even peer interactions are influenced by broader social hierarchies. Similarly, Rogers et al. (2023) argued that peer learning is crucial even for social workers who are already practising, as this enables them to learn to collaborate effectively and reflect on shared experiences. Nevertheless, this perspective may not fully account for how professional hierarchies and power dynamics influence peer learning experiences.

The findings show that by engaging in discussions and exchanging perspectives with others, students can collectively build upon and expand their understanding of complex social issues such as abortion and other theoretical concepts in social work education. The participants placed value on classroom discussions and participation. They noted that speaking out was encouraged before higher education, and viewed it as crucial for different learning curves. For example, participants noted that during participation, one can self-correct, which is vital for social work education, as it speaks to aspects of self-reflection and self-awareness (Flem et al., 2023). The participants further referred to the '*class as being alive'* when discussions and debates occurred, suggesting the transformative potential of dialogical learning experiences to nurture critical reflection, empower students, and enhance collaborative problem-solving. However, this phrase '*class becoming alive*' during debates warrants analysis through the lens of what Hooks (1994) termed 'engaged pedagogy,' questioning whose voices dominate these 'alive' moments and whose remain silenced. It was evident in this stud that this was only limited to a 'dominant' few students, while lecturers continued to control the narrative. This study maintains that even though phrases such as *'No wrong or correct answer'* come under scrutiny above, these propose a vital principle underpinning epistemological dialogues, encouraging participation, open dialogue, and honesty about oneself- key components for the critical learning process (*learning, un-learning, and re-learning*) in Social Work.

The value placed on dialogues reflects the role that they played on TCC and TCA.

Chapter 6 revealed that the dialogues were mainly incorporated into online learning (76,6%). While the value placed shows dialogues by participants, the macro process results (below) indicate a negative effect, revealing that although the dialogues have a mediating impact on TCC and TCA, the effect is questionable when online learning is used as a method of teaching and learning. The researcher questions the nature of the included dialogues, aligning with scholars such as Rapanta et al. (2023), who have placed a fundamental value on the quality of dialogues. Conversely, Dube (2020) highlighted the challenges of online learning in South Africa. The quantitative results above confirm these challenges, particularly for social work education, as there is no significant relationship between OL, TCC, and TCA. These results suggest that incorporating higher-level dialogues, which trigger higher cognitive functions during online learning, was challenging.

To a certain extent, the author draws on Bloom's Taxonomy to question whether the lecturers incorporated level-specific dialogues suitable for students' academic levels (Chandio et al., 2016). While dialogues are essential in learning, the author maintains that learning is about more questions than answers; therefore, there should be more critical examination at a higher level, triggering higher cognitive functions. Yet this study asks: whose questions are being centred, and whose forms of cognition are being valued? If such questions are not addressed, the risk of perpetuating oppression remains high. Dialogues should extend beyond mere collaboration, allowing students to drive education while the lecturers act as facilitators of learning. However, this study revealed that the dialogues were centred on the lecturer, with the '*hot seat method*' identified in the preceding chapters, further questioning how dialogues were incorporated into learning during online learning.

8.4. Multivariate regression Analysis

The linear logistics regression model (for both continuous and binary variables) presented below illustrates the role of epistemological dialogues in mediating the relationship between online learning and the development of crucial consciousness (TCC & TCA). This section begins with the mediating role of ED on TCC and is followed by the mediating role of ED on TCA. It is important to that the earlier correlation results indicated no significant relationship between OL, TCC and TCA.

Mediating relationship OL, ED, and TCC

Model Summary:

					Change Statistics				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	,267[a]	,071	,062	,37970	,071	8,062	2	210	<,001

a. Predictors: OL, ED, & TCC

Table 17: Mediating effect one: OL, ED, and TCC

In this regression analysis above, the model explains a 26.7% change variance of TCC. It further demonstrates a limited but evident ability to explain the variability in the response variable when the mediating variable is included, with an R Square of 0.071. This suggests that only about 7.1% of the variation can be accounted for by the mediating variable. Despite the modest explanatory power, the overall model is statistically significant (F Change = 8.062, $p < 0.001$), indicating that, collectively, the mediating variable contributes significantly to the model. Additionally, the low R-squared value indicates that the model only explains a small portion of the variance in critical consciousness, implying that other factors beyond epistemological dialogues likely influence critical consciousness development (TCC) in online learning environments. However, the statistically significant F-change value suggests that including epistemological dialogues significantly contributes to the model. This

finding demonstrates that epistemological dialogues mediate the relationship between online learning and critical consciousness.

Mediating relationship OL, ED and TCA

Model Summary:

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	,340[a]	,116	,107	,53466	,116	13,742	2	210	<,001

a. *Predictors: OL, ED, & TCA*

Table 18: Mediating effect Two: OL, ED, and TCA

The regression model indicates that epistemological dialogues significantly explain critical consciousness development in online learning environments. The model describes a moderate 34.0% variance in critical consciousness. While this may not seem exceptionally high, it is a substantial improvement compared to a model that would not account for the mediating effect of dialogues as evident in the correlation results between online learning and TCA. Additionally, the adjusted R-squared value of 10.7% indicates that the inclusion of epistemological dialogues meaningfully contributes to the model's explanatory power, even after considering the number of variables in the model. The analysis further strengthens the case for a mediating role by demonstrating a significant change in explained variance (11,6%) when including epistemological dialogues. This indicates that dialogues explain a considerable portion of the relationship between online learning and critical consciousness development. The statistically significant F-change value further supports this finding by indicating that this improvement in explained variance is unlikely to be due to chance.

Transformative Social Work Education

Another significant theme that emerged from the data was transformative social work education. This concept was prominently reflected in the qualitative findings, accentuating the crucial role of critical inquiry and self-reflection in fostering meaningful change within

social work education. The following reflections and narratives from participants provide a rich account of their engagement with transformative social work education:

> Participant Nine: *"For me, during online classes, I think I participated more because, I believe that when you participate, you are learning and when you participate, sometimes you are being challenged by the lecturer and some students who participate. So, when we are challenged, we develop. I ended up reconsidering some views I had, especially growing up in a township about women, and gender-based violence because all I knew for example beating your girlfriend gained you respect, it was all I knew. But those views now are changing…"*
>
> Participant Twelve: "*…I have a group, but not alone, with other peers, it is basically a group where I have been able to share my experiences and reflect on my journey in life. I joined it after the Zoom tutorial where we were reflecting as social work students about ourselves and the facilitator mentioned that group. I think I have grown… we started by giving one another support. So, I think that the first thing that we need, we needed to do was to give each other support before we even moved outside to help someone you know, it started like that. It is a support group, basically for LGBTQI +…" (Quoted in chapter 7).*

The transformative potential of this educational approach was not only evident in the participants' experiences but also aligned with the broader goals of emancipatory pedagogy. The researcher was particularly attentive to the emphasis participants placed on the integration of critical inquiry and self-reflection as pivotal to their professional and personal development. These processes serve not merely as academic exercises but as essential tools for challenging dominant ideologies and developing social justice-oriented practice. The findings highlight the significance of epistemological dialogues, and their impact in transformative social work education through critical inquiry that incorporate self-reflection

and its transformative impact. For example, the extracts from Participant Nine above indicate transformation, but they also reveal the complex interplay between educational dialogue and the reproduction of social norms. This research problematises such 'transformative' narratives, arguing that they often mask the reinforcement of dominant ideologies under the guise of critical thinking. While the positive shift in views on issues such as gender-based violence is noteworthy, one must interrogate whether this represents genuine transformation or merely the substitution of one hegemonic discourse for another. The participant's township background introduces crucial intersectional considerations - how do digital divides and socioeconomic factors shape participation in online learning spaces, and how do class, race, and urban/rural divides intersect with educational experiences? This research posits that South African higher education frames certain viewpoints as requiring 'transformation,' which inadvertently reinforces existing social hierarchies, depriving genuine transformation.

The excerpts of the participants above demonstrate that engaging in epistemological dialogues, such as online class discussions, goes beyond mere information dissemination. It becomes a crucible for intellectual growth, where students are challenged by both lecturers and classmates. This finding aligns with Sewpaul et al. (2011) on creating classrooms that embrace such practices, recognising their importance in social work education and reflective learning. The researcher asserts that such exchanges foster critical inquiry, pushing individuals to confront existing beliefs and assumptions. Participant Nine's personal experience of re-evaluating deeply held views on gender-based violence exemplifies this transformative power. Engaging in discussions during online classes exposed them to diverse perspectives, necessitating a process of self-reflection that potentially led to a change in perspective. This emphasis on self-reflection is central to the transformative potential of active participation (Flem et al., 2023). Confronting new information and encountering contrasting viewpoints forces students to re-examine their positions (Nomdo, 2023). As

evident, this self-reflection is not merely passive introspection; it is a catalyst for intellectual growth. Through this process, students can refine their understanding of the world and develop a more informed perspective.

Participant Twelve has also highlighted the transformative potential of group participation and reflective practice within social work education. The participants talked about efforts to "begin with the self" by joining a support group, which was fundamental for self-reflection. This further offers insights into the interrelation of personal and professional identity development within social work education. Likewise, Participant Three stated, "…*when we had dialogues and classroom and question-answer sessions, it was great. I thought it was very beneficial. Because we got to know everyone's opinions, everyone's views, there were times when we all did not agree on a certain aspect or a certain topic, like we had different answers..."* Minzhanov et al. (2016) argued that pedagogical training and active learning methods play a pivotal role in the professional training of social workers for the development of professionally significant qualities, with group work being instrumental. However, one needs to be wary of groupthink, where participants may uncritically accept the taken-for-granted assumptions. Dialogues expose the unequal power relations in knowledge production, where negotiating differing viewpoints often covers the subtle reinforcement of dominant ideologies. Even when disagreements occur, these moments are contained within a pedagogical structure that reaffirms rather than disrupts the status quo.

What is also highlighted in the findings above is the foundational role of peer support fora conducive environment for critical consciousness. These metacognitive processes, coupled with reflexivity, are essential elements in the development of self-awareness and empathy, particularly in culturally diverse contexts such as South Africa. The transformative learning outcomes inherent in emancipatory social work education were facilitated through epistemological dialogues during online learning, and some students were the beneficiaries of

these processes. This study, therefore, argues that while dialogical learning can facilitate transformative experiences in social work education, such transformation is complex and contingent. The data suggests that meaningful learning transformations can occur when students engage in sustained dialogue, encounter diverse perspectives, and have opportunities for reflection both individually and with peers.

8.5. Mediation Analysis

One of the most robust methods for the mediation effect is the PROCESS macro analysis (Hayes, 2022). The researcher used PROCESS macro analysis to establish ED's direct and indirect effects on the relationship between OL and TCC and between OL and TCA. The following are the results:

Mediating Effect: ED on the relationship between OL and TCC

Effect	Coefficient	Standard error	T-value	P-Value	LLCI	ULCI
Direct Effect of OL on TCC	-0.0464	0.1336	-0.3469	0.7290	-0.3098	0.2171
Effect of OL on ED	-0.4631	0.1804	-2.5673	0.0109	-0.8187	-0.1075
Effect of ED on TCC	0.1948	0.0502	3.8791	0.0001	0.0958	0.2938
Indirect Effect of OL on TCC through ED	-0.0902	-	-	-	-	-

Table 20: Mediating effect of ED on OL and TCC

The table above shows two main things in line with this study; firstly, without ED in social work education during online learning, there was no significant direct relationship between OL and TCC. The direct effect coefficient is -0.0464, with a p-value of 0.7290, indicating a non-significance effect, suggesting that OL did not lead to the development of TCC. It is important to note that the difference in p-values between the Pearson correlation and the PROCESS macro lies on the premise that PROCESS macro measures the direct effect of OL on TCC while controlling for the mediator (ED). In contrast, person correlation simply

measures a direct relationship.

When ED is included, the relationship between OL and TCC becomes significant through an indirect pathway (-0.0902). The coefficient for the effect of ED on TCC is 0.1948, with a p-value of 0.0001, indicating a statistically significant positive impact. This result aligns with Freire's (1970) emphasis on dialogic education for critical consciousness. The researcher argues that this positive relationship accentuates the crucial role of meaningful dialogues in fostering transformative learning outcomes and development amongst students.

The indirect effect of -0.0902 shows the negative impact of OL on ED. This is explained by the significant negative effect of OL on ED (coefficient = -0.4631, p = 0.0109). This, therefore, creates a curvilinear relationship when ED is included as a mediator between OL and TCC. Mhlanga and Moloi (2020) argued that the rapid shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic exposed technological gaps and pedagogical unpreparedness in South African higher education. The researcher posits that the negative mediating effect observed in this study supports this argument, suggesting that the challenges extend beyond mere technological issues to fundamental pedagogical concerns within the online environment. Furthermore, the qualitative findings in Chapter 6 reveal that while ED were evident, they were centred around a few individuals, were lecturer-centred, and centred on the 'hot seat' methods. All these allude to the quality of dialogues during online learning. The study argues that online content delivery should emphasise the critical questions 'how' and 'why', especially within the South African context with persisting inequalities.

Mediating Effect: ED on the relationship between OL and TCA

Effect	**Coefficient**	**Standard error**	**T-value**	**P-Value**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Effect of OL on ED	-0.4631	0.1804	-2.5673	0.0109	-0.8187	-0.1075
Effect of ED on TCA	0.3415	0.0707	4.8294	0.0000	0.2021	0.4809

Direct Effect of OL on TCA	-0.2199	0.1882	-1.1684	0.2440	-0.5908	0.1511
Indirect Effect of OL on TCA through ED	-0.1582	-	-	-	-	-

Table 21: Mediating effect of ED on OL and TCA

The table above shows that the direct effect of OL on TCA is not statistically significant (p = 0.2440). This indicates that OL does not have a direct impact on TCA when ED are omitted. Also, OL significantly affects ED negatively (coefficient= -0.4631; p = 0.0109). However, the indirect effect of OL on TCA through ED is -0.1582. This result aligns with the qualitative findings in this study, which suggest that poorly implemented ED in online learning weakens the positive effects of ED on the development of TCA. Throughout the study, participants highlighted the value and effectiveness of ED in learning, but quality was compromised especial for social work praxis. This is because TCA is at a higher level and requires more than just application, hence the curvilinear relationship even in this instance.

Czerniewicz et al. (2020) argued that the shift to online learning in South Africa has exacerbated social and economic disparities. The negative mediating effect observed in this study supports this argument, as these disparities are left unchallenged even by students due to limited development of TCA. The researcher further posits that online learning is not only struggling to facilitate epistemological dialogues but is also indirectly hindering the development of critical consciousness action amongst social work students in South Africa. Moonasamy and Naidoo (2022) suggested that pre-existing biases might influence negative perceptions of online learning. However, the researcher argues that this study's consistent negative mediating effect indicates that the challenges go beyond mere perception, pointing to substantive issues in implementing online learning for social work education.

Online learning as a barrier to the development of critical consciousness

Although epistemological dialogues were identified as significant in facilitating critical consciousness, related challenges emerged during the interviews. These challenges include, but are not limited to, dialogical resistance and reluctance, discomfort with online discourse and language barriers, online constraints on multiple perspectives, and the difficulty in creating a safe space for reflective learning. The following are the findings:

> Participant Eleven: "*I sometimes feel very hesitant to speak up in class especially when we have to talk about gays and lesbians (LGBTQI+) topics online, because I am not sure how my classmates or even the lecturer will react. It is easier to stay silent than to risk saying something wrong. You know, coming from a deep rural background in Zulu culture, discussing certain topics openly can be uncomfortable, especially in a class with different students. This makes it hard to participate or even engage truthfully."*

The data from Participant Eleven above shows that students from diverse backgrounds may have varying communication styles or different levels of comfort with open debate, which is particularly relevant in discussions surrounding complex issues such as LGBTQI+ topics. Similarly, Sue and Sue (2013), noted this as a common issue, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. As such, the researcher asserts that cultural norms or personal beliefs may contribute to a reluctance to engage in critical epistemological dialogues. As a result, online learning exacerbates pre-existing cultural and individual barriers to critical dialogue. This reflects not just personal discomfort but a more complex negotiation of cultural capital within online spaces, which privileges certain forms of knowledge production and expression.

In this study, it has been noted that there were dominant voices in discussions, and some students could not participate even if they wanted to. The following reflection highlights this point:

Participant Seven*: "I remember that during our discussion online, there were a few voices that could speak and really participate in class. For me, it was sometimes hard to jump in and share my thoughts or reflections on topics discussed. I ended up trying to use the chat to try and type by the time I finish a typing out my response, the discussion had already moved on…"*

Participant Fourteen: "*…Sometimes, it feels like those who are more fluent in English, confident or more familiar with online platforms take over, leaving little room for others who want to participate, and sometimes the lecturers did not realise this, some quickly moved from topic to topic and only given time for participation on questions and answers at the end which was also limited"*

Based on the reflections above, the researcher argues that online environments can unintentionally replicate power imbalances that are present in traditional classrooms. As Dosani (2022) highlighted, online anonymity can create a 'disinhibition effect', where dominant personalities or students with greater comfort in the online space may overshadow quieter voices. This hinders the free exchange of ideas and respectful debate. In addition, Casale et al. (2015) argued that, despite the potential for anonymity, online interactions can sometimes lack civility or respectful discourse. One of the participants (nine) highlighted students' limited understanding of online etiquette when online learning was introduced and used in social work education at South African Institutions of higher learning. As some student did not even share their videos, Participant Nine stated:

"It makes me cautious about sharing my true opinions, especially on sensitive issues…without seeing someone's face or hearing their voice, it is easy to misunderstand what they mean, and that can lead to unnecessary conflict…"

The above can be further amplified by the limitations of text-based communication in conveying emotions (Herring et al.,2013). The fear of judgment or misinterpretation can discourage genuine engagement and critical inquiry, especially on topics that evoke strong emotions (Herring et al., 2013). In the findings above, this is one of the factors that prevent students from engaging in genuine dialogues and reflections. Regarding the findings, which highlighted language challenges, it is crucial to note that language proficiency remains another hurdle in diverse online environments, especially within South Africa. For example, participant Ten stated, "*English is not my first language, so I often find it hard to express my thoughts clearly in discussions. This makes me less likely to participate actively because I am afraid of being misunderstood*." Consistent with this, Singh (2018) argued that students with limited proficiency in the dominant language, in this case, English, may struggle to articulate complex ideas, hindering their ability to engage fully in critical inquiry. The study argues that the hegemony of English in online learning environments represents not just a practical communication barrier but a form of epistemic violence, marginalising students' voices and ways of knowing. Drawing on Ngugi wa Thiong'o's cited in Rani (2022) concept of linguistic decolonisation, this study questions how the privileging of English fundamentally shapes the types of critical consciousness that emerge.

In addition to the above, the findings show that this challenge is particularly acute in discussions about sensitive topics where profound expressions are crucial. Also, the inherent limitations during online classes can restrict the development of multiple perspectives and rich dialogue. Asynchronous interactions, due to structural issues and inequalities in South Africa (Dube, 2020; Makhanya and Mfishi, 2023), where responses are not immediate, can

hinder the flow of conversation and make it challenging to build upon others' ideas. Moreover, the limited opportunities for non-verbal cues and body language can make it difficult to fully grasp the emotions or intent behind a message, leading to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. This may contribute to the limited engagement in the dialogical inquiry, where only a subset of students participates (Aldunate & González-Ibáñez, 2017), a concern expressed by participants in this study.

The findings also highlight the challenges in creating an online environment conducive to critical self-reflection. Participants stated that there was no space for empathy during online classes, and the online environment was distant. For example, Participant Four stated, "*…the sense of community is missing online. There is no connection, and it is hard to open up and reflect deeply on the issues we have experienced relevant to topics being discussed…It is hard to feel like we are all in this together when we are just faces on a screen".* In this statement, it is clear that distance and distractions inherent in the online environment can make it difficult for students to fully connect and engage in deep introspection. Notably, the lack of face-to-face interaction during online learning hindered the development of a sense of community amongst social work students, depriving them of shared experiences crucial for meaningful self-reflection within social work education.

8.6. Conclusion

This chapter provides compelling evidence of the role epistemological dialogues play in the development of critical consciousness, particularly within the context of online learning. The findings highlight a fundamental need for reconceptualization of emancipatory education in online spaces to address the fundamental questions raised in this chapter. Throughout this chapter, the researcher has emphasised the importance of epistemological dialogues for emancipatory education in social work, a point supported by the results. Based on the findings, the researcher asserts a need for pedagogies that actively encourage 'activist-student

sensibilities.' Additionally, social work practice's practical and contextual nature is particularly challenging to replicate in online environments within the South African context. The consistent negative mediating effects observed indicate that current online learning approaches fail to meet these needs, calling for a fundamental rethinking of online pedagogies in social work education. Current online learning modalities must be improved to foster the TCC and TCA essential to social work practice.

This chapter employed a joint displays table and narrative integration approach, which was crucial for merging the results within an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. The strength of the analytical methods, as noted in the P-values, and the use of the PROCESS macro for controlling other factors, were vital in illustrating both the direct and indirect effects of the variables under study. The results indicate that, without epistemological dialogues, online learning does not impact TCC and TCA. However, while the inclusion of epistemological dialogues enhances the effects, the quality of these dialogues within the South African context during the COVID-19 pandemic and the overall implementation process was inadequate to meet the needs of emancipatory education in social work.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

9.1. Introduction

This study was born from a conviction that students, particularly those from South African context, are shaped by deeply entrenched systemic inequities. Motivated by this belief, the author, drawing from his experiences as an African student and the wealth of literature, recognised that ignoring the historical context of education would be a critical misstep. Understanding this context is essential to comprehending the lived experiences and challenges these students face. Disconnecting students from their socio-cultural and historical roots in the learning process risks not only undermining the goals of emancipatory education but also perpetuating the very disparities it seeks to dismantle. The COVID-19 pandemic, which magnified existing inequalities through the shift to online learning, highlighted a pressing need to examine and understand how students navigated their education within an emancipatory pedagogical framework. This study is a response to that need.

This chapter offers a detailed summary of the key findings, including the major conclusions about the impact of online learning on emancipatory education. It also discusses the broader implications of these findings for future social work education, practice, research, and higher education, accompanied by targeted recommendations.

9.2. Summary of the study

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the impact of online learning during COVID-19 on the envisioned emancipatory social work education at a South African University. It specifically assessed social work students' experience with emancipatory education during this period. Critical components of emancipatory pedagogy, such as the use

of epistemological dialogues (ED), the development of Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC), and the development of Transformative Critical Action (TCA), were rigorously examined. Additionally, this study investigated the mediating role of epistemological dialogues in the relationship between Online Learning (OL) and both TCC and TCA. This comprehensive approach provided insights into how social work education delivery changed during the pandemic. The chosen research approach empowered the researcher to address the complex, multifaceted nature of emancipatory education in an online environment, providing data that might have remained obscured through a single approach.

The study adopted an explanatory sequential design within the mixed-methods approach to achieve the research objectives, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data. The use of narrative and joint-display integration was crucial for presenting a comprehensive picture of the results and integration thereof. This approach allowed for the integration of rigorous statistical data with rich contextually informed findings, ensuring a critical understanding of the impact of online learning on social work emancipatory education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What was crucial in enhancing this study was adopting a multiple-paradigm approach, incorporating both post-positivist and critical paradigms. While it is uncommon for multiple paradigms to coexist in research, this combination allowed the study to explore the research questions from different perspectives. The post-positivist paradigm was essential for understanding participants within their broader social contexts while maintaining the scientific rigour of mixed-methods research while the critical paradigm was crucial for analysing participants' experiences within their natural setting, identifying structural inequalities, and interrogating key issues entrenched within South African higher education settings. The use of these paradigms provided a broader and deeper understanding of how

students experienced online learning and how emancipatory education was either supported or hindered by this learning mode.

The study was grounded in emancipatory pedagogy theory, which shaped the overall framework of the research, including developing the study's objectives, hypotheses, and developing and modifying scales used in this study. The theory was critical in framing the conceptual underpinnings of critical consciousness and epistemological dialogues, aligning the research within a critical paradigm that emphasised the importance of addressing systemic oppression and promoting social justice in education. The study also critically assessed the relevance of emancipatory pedagogy within the context of social work education during the pandemic, particularly as it relates to fostering transformative learning through online platforms. The theory was also fundamental in shaping the analysis and interpretation of findings despite its critiques. The researcher asserts that its adoption offered a comprehensive investigation into the impact of online learning on social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlighted the importance of epistemological dialogues in promoting critical consciousness (TCC and TCA). It provided insights into how social work education can adapt to the challenges of online learning while retaining its emancipatory and transformative goals.

9.3. Summary of Key Findings

Epistemological Dialogues Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic in Social Work Education

The study revealed a notable integration of epistemological dialogues in online social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. Students were actively engaged in various forms of dialogue, including question-and-answer sessions, discussions on taught subjects, debates on socio-economic and political issues, and dialogues on current affairs. These findings support Freire's (1970) emphasis on the importance of dialogue in fostering

critical consciousness. However, the study found considerable variation in the quality and effectiveness of these dialogues, aligning with Rapanta et al. (2023), who argued that the transformative potential of dialogues lies not merely in participation but in the depth and quality of engagement.

Contrary to the quantitative data, qualitative findings revealed that dialogues were often lecturer-centred and benefited only a few students, while most did not experience meaningful engagement. These findings contrast with Nouri et al. (2018), who highlighted the potential of dialogic approaches in online learning to enhance critical thinking. The study attributes this discrepancy to the rapid shift to online learning and insufficient capacity building for both students and academics, which significantly impacted the nature of epistemological dialogues. This perspective aligns with Czerniewicz et al. (2020), who noted the challenges of maintaining pedagogical practices during the pandemic.

One of the study's key findings is the inverse relationship between online learning and the quality of epistemological dialogues, which echoed Howe et al.'s (2019) findings on the influence of learning methods on dialogue effectiveness. Technological barriers and the digital divide were identified as significant obstacles to meaningful dialogues, and this was consistent with recent research by Dube (2020), Hlatshwayo (2022), and Mpungose (2020). The findings also underlined a tension between student-centred and lecturer-centred approaches. Authentic student engagement and ownership of learning were often limited, reinforcing the view that the online learning environment largely constrained interactive, student-driven dialogue. Although the study identified widespread attempts to incorporation of epistemological dialogues in online social work education, significant challenges hindered their full implementation and effectiveness. The researcher argues that these findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on the necessity of innovative, student-centred

approaches in online learning, particularly within the context of South African higher education and social work education.

Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC) and Transformative Critical Action (TCA) in Social Work Education during Online learning

The study revealed that social work students developed a relatively high level of Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC) during online learning. However, the depth of engagement was often superficial, challenging Abdul Razzak (2016) assertion that online environments can be used to deepen critical engagement. In contrast, Transformative Critical Action (TCA) was significantly less developed among students. They struggled to translate TCC into TCA and praxis, citing a lack of fieldwork opportunities and practical engagement as critical barriers. Based on this finding this study disputes that online learning can drive practical engagement and action in applied human sciences, highlighting the crucial role of hands-on experience in developing praxis as conceptualised by Freire (1970).

The study found that online learning did not significantly contribute to the development of TCC or TCA, reinforcing Weeden and Cornwell's (2020) critique of the pedagogical limitations inherent in the rapid shift to online education. However, the incorporation of epistemological dialogues during online learning was significantly correlated with both TCC and TCA, highlighting the importance of intentional dialogical strategies in online environments. Reflective learning was also significantly hindered by the absence of face-to-face interactions, aligning with Hlatshwayo's (2021) observations. Furthermore, the lack of practical engagement opportunities severely limited the development of praxis, challenging assertions regarding online learning effectively replicating real-world experiential learning. These findings also highlight the pivotal role of hands-on practical skills in social work education, as emphasised by Nel and Pretorius (2019).

The study lastly revealed low levels of student engagement and a preference for

passive learning approaches in online environments. Freire's (1970) critiqued the banking model of education, but as evident, it was continuously practised during online learning. On one hand, language barriers and cultural dynamics were identified as significant obstacles to student participation – perhaps justifying the banking learning model employed. Flem et al. (2023) discussed about language marginalisation in diverse learning environments. However, some students demonstrated agency by asserting their cultural identities through language use, challenging the dominance of English in online classrooms and revealing the complex interplay between language, culture, and learning in diverse online settings.

Epistemological dialogues (ED), Online learning (OL), and critical consciousness (TCC and TCA)

The findings revealed a complex interaction between online learning (OL) and the development of critical consciousness (TCC and TCA) in South African social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the key finding was that online learning alone did not significantly impact the development of TCC or TCA. Although OL provided a necessary platform for education continuity during the pandemic, its format lacked the relational and dialogical depth of face-to-face learning. It failed to foster the deep critical reflection and practical application required for transformative critical consciousness.

The study stressed the critical role of epistemological dialogues in fostering TCC and TCA, aligning with Freire's (1970) principles of critical pedagogy and the importance of dialogical learning in achieving emancipatory educational goals. ED significantly enhanced students' critical engagement, demonstrating strong correlations with TCC and TCA. These findings confirm that dialogues rooted in critical reflection and social engagement are essential for enabling students to move from awareness of societal inequities to the capacity for transformative action. However, the study found that OL negatively affected ED, revealing that the online learning environment posed significant challenges to the

effectiveness of these dialogues. The indirect effect of OL on TCC and TCA through ED was negative, illustrating that while OL facilitated access to learning, it undermined the quality of critical dialogues essential for developing deeper critical consciousness and practical action.

The findings further revealed significant barriers to effective dialogical engagement within the online learning environment. Students reported discomfort when engaging with sensitive topics, such as LGBTQI+ issues, race, and gender, particularly in impersonal and often intimidating online spaces. This discomfort, exacerbated by the absence of face-to-face interaction, limited the open exchange necessary for critical dialogue and transformative learning. The power imbalances and language barriers identified within the online environment also hindered inclusive participation. The study asserts that this reflects broader educational inequities and social dynamics that persist in South African higher education. These barriers are particularly pronounced in the online environment for teaching and learning, where the lack of direct interpersonal connection further constrains the ability of students to engage meaningfully in emancipatory dialogues. The study aligns with the work of Price-Dennis, and Sealey-Ruiz (2021) on the impact of cultural norms on critical engagement, demonstrating that online environments can perpetuate linguistic and cultural marginalisation rather than creating inclusive critical dialogues.

Another significant finding was the compromise of relational learning, a cornerstone of emancipatory pedagogy. Relational learning, critical for dialogue-based education, was limited in online learning, with students struggling to build the peer-to-peer relationships necessary for knowledge co-construction and critical self-reflection. These results diminished the transformative potential of online learning despite its ability to increase educational access. The absence of relational dynamics in online classrooms compromised the development of TCC and TCA, as students were deprived of the opportunity to engage in meaningful, reflective discussions essential for transforming critical awareness into social

action. The study supports the theory of Mezirow (2008) and arguments in transformative learning theory (Hoggan, 2016), which emphasise the importance of relational and collaborative learning environments for fostering deep critical reflection and transformation.

The indirect negative effect of OL on both TCC and TCA through ED highlights a critical gap in the ability of online learning to achieve the goals of emancipatory education. While online learning can expand access to education, it falls short of facilitating the deep, reflective, and dialogical engagement required for students to develop critical consciousness and take transformative action. The findings emphasise that the success of online education in social work is heavily dependent on the intentional design and integration of epistemological dialogues, as well as the creation of relational spaces that foster critical engagement and collaborative learning. Without these elements, the transformative potential of social work education -particularly in contexts marked by historical oppression and systemic inequalities is severely compromised.

9.4. Major Conclusions

This study provides critical data onto the impacts of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on emancipatory social work education at a South African University, yielding numerous conclusions that challenge prevailing assumptions in the profession. The research concludes that the shift to online learning produced complex and often contradictory findings about the emancipatory potential of online education in social work. Of importance, the research concludes that the shift to online learning has exposed a critical disjuncture between the espoused emancipatory ideals of social work education and their realisation in online spaces. This study further argues that online learning, far from being a neutral medium, actively reconfigures the ontological nature of pedagogical interactions, thereby challenging the simplistic notions that technology alone can solve problems in education.

The study concludes that online learning, despite its purported benefits, fundamentally

altered the nature of epistemological dialogues which are central to emancipatory pedagogy. While there was an increase in the number of dialogic interactions, the study finds that the quality and depth of these exchanges were often compromised in the online environment. This disconnect between the frequency and effectiveness of dialogues undermined the transformative potential of social work education. In addition, online learning paradoxically impacts students' critical consciousness development. While the online platforms facilitated a quantitative increase in dialogic practices and appeared to enhance Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC), they simultaneously impeded the progression towards Transformative Critical Action (TCA). This disparity exposes a crucial limitation of online learning in bridging the gap between TCC and TCA in social work education. This gap further unveils a fundamental limitation of current online pedagogies in fostering the kind of hands-on contextually grounded learning central to emancipatory social work education.

This study concludes that the transition to online learning has exposed and exacerbated existing educational and structural inequities within South African higher education, which were reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to techno-utopian narratives of online democratisation, the study demonstrates that online learning environments have emerged as new sites of linguistic and cultural contestation, where historical patterns of marginalisation are reproduced and, in some instances, intensified. However, the study concludes that the online environment, despite its limitations, can serve as a space for cultural assertion and identity renegotiation. Instances of students using their native languages in online classes illustrate the potential for online platforms to foster cultural agency, even within constrained settings.

The study reveals a form of epistemological violence inherent in the uncritical adoption of Western-centric online platforms and pedagogies. It concludes that these technologies, embedded with 'particular cultural and ideological assumptions', often clash

with indigenous knowledge systems and local ways of knowing, thereby undermining the decolonial aspirations of South African social work education. The study also concludes that the disembodied nature of online interactions fundamentally alters the relational dynamics central to social work practice. This ontological shift challenges core assumptions about how empathy, critical reflection, and transformative dialogue can be fostered in online spaces, calling into question the very foundations of social work pedagogy.

The study concludes that realising the emancipatory goals of social work education in an online context requires a fundamental rethinking of current pedagogical approaches. This study posits that achieving 'truly' emancipatory Social Work education in online contexts necessitates a radical reconceptualization of online pedagogy. It calls for developing innovative, culturally responsive approaches to navigate the tension between global technological imperatives, local socio-cultural realities and historic injustices in South Africa.

These conclusions contribute to a deeper understanding the challenges and opportunities in online social work education, highlighting the tension between the field's emancipatory ideals and the practical realities of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, by exposing the contradictions and complexities inherent in the digitalisation of social work Education, this study opens up new avenues for theoretical exploration and practical innovation in pursuing truly transformative learning experiences-advancing the envisioned emancipatory social work education. it emphasises the urgent need for context-sensitive approaches to bridge the gap between theoretical aspirations and lived educational experiences in an online environment within the South African context.

9.5. Implications

It is noteworthy that the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the years (2020-2022) when online learning was adopted as a method of teaching and learning. While there has been a shift to the blended learning method, the findings of this

study highlight the need to reflect on the lessons learned from online learning in South Africa, noting their implications for the current method of teaching and learning. These implications extend to social work education, practice, research, and the broader framework of higher education in South Africa.

Implications for Social Work Education

The conclusions of this study, grounded in emancipatory pedagogy theory, necessitate a transformation in social work education. The findings suggest that online learning, without significant transformation and innovation, perpetuates and may even exacerbate existing educational inequities- contradicting the transformation goals outlined in Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, the National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001), and the Bachelor of Social Work Standard (CHE, 2015) among others. To counter this, lecturers must move towards pedagogical frameworks that emphasise critical dialogue, relational engagement, and culturally relevant practices within education. This argument aligns with Freire's (1970) concept of problem-posing education, which is particularly important in social work education in South Africa. This study argues that Social Work programmes should explore ways to intentionally incorporate pedagogies and tools into co-constructed learning experiences that prioritise student agency and foster critical consciousness.

Considering the historical inequalities within South African education, the study argues for the importance of critical pedagogy. Building upon Gramscian and Giroux's theories, the emphasis is on the role of education in transforming 'common sense' into 'good sense' and challenging hegemonic practices. This research stresses the significance of epistemological dialogues in social work education, indicating their potential to promote cognitive justice and transformative pedagogy. The study advocates for pedagogical approaches that empower students to become active agents in their learning and society. Decolonial and Afrocentric pedagogical models, which are inherently emancipatory, should

be at the core of curriculum and teaching and learning transformation in social work education. Additionally, the reliance on Western-centric prescriptions, even in educational technologies, requires critical re-evaluation in favour of indigenous knowledge systems and local epistemologies, considering students' realities and lived experiences.

The author asserts that technology should serve as a tool, not a master, in higher education. The current reliance on and application of Western-centric technology perpetuates inequalities in South African higher education, given the socio-demographics of students. This study aligns with growing calls for educational epistemic justice (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), ensuring that students from disadvantaged communities can connect their learning with their lived realities and cultural identities. Creating multilingual learning platforms should become standard practice, facilitating inclusive dialogues and empowerment across diverse student populations. This is particularly relevant in the South African context, where linguistic diversity plays a crucial role in education and Social Work practice, and where language can be a tool for emancipation or oppression (Madiba, 2018; Freire, 1970).

Implications for Social Work Practice

The conclusions from this study also have significant practical implications for social work practitioners, particularly those who studied during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal a critical gap between the development of Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC) and the ability to translate this awareness into Transformative Critical Action (TCA), posing substantial challenges for future practice. This disconnect highlights the need for an approach to professional development that bridges theory and practice.

The author argues that the training of social work students should focus on enhancing practical skills in advocacy, community engagement, group mobilisation and even in individual empowerment. In addition, Social Work agencies in South Africa must create structured orientation programmes that provide these practitioners with opportunities to

engage in hands-on experiences, reinforcing the connection between theory and practice and enabling them to navigate real-world challenges more effectively. Importantly, these programmes should be designed within an emancipatory framework, encouraging new practitioners to critically examine power structures and work towards social transformation. The study's findings also emphasise the importance of nurturing a culture of reflective practice and continuous learning within social work settings, particularly for those who studied/trained during the pandemic. As argued in this study, reflective practice is crucial for professional growth and effective intervention. Practitioners should be encouraged to participate in reflective supervision drawn from emancipatory and Afrocentric lenses that focus on applying critical consciousness to everyday practice.

The author asserts that it is crucial to approach these implications and suggestions with a critical lens. While the emphasis on individual practice is important, it should not overshadow the need for systemic change within the social work profession and broader society. An over-focus on reflective practice and individual skill development can depoliticise Social Work, shifting attention away from structural inequalities and social justice issues that remain crucial in the South African context. Therefore, while implementing these practice implications, it is essential to maintain a critical perspective that connects individual practice to broader social and political contexts. This study argues that this must also be done with a commitment to challenging oppressive structures and promoting social justice, as emphasised by critical and anti-oppressive social work perspectives (Baines, 2020; Dominelli, 2002). Likewise, these efforts should enhance practitioners' capacity to contribute meaningfully to social justice initiatives and community empowerment efforts in South Africa, always with the goal of transformative social change at the forefront.

Implications for Social Work Research

The study identifies critical areas for further research in social work education, particularly in understanding the long-term impacts of online learning and how the lessons learned can inform blended learning models. One primary research implication is the need to explore the integration of online and face-to-face pedagogies in ways that promote critical consciousness within social work education. Future research should investigate how blended learning environments can be structured to ensure that the critical reflection fostered by epistemological dialogues translates into meaningful social action.

The findings also reveal that socio-economic inequalities and digital divides hindered the full effectiveness of online learning, a challenge that remains relevant in the current blended learning landscape. Further research is necessary to understand how blended learning models can be equitable, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may continue to face technological barriers. This research will be crucial in developing socially just educational policies ensuring equal access to online and face-to-face learning opportunities.

Interdisciplinary research is also vital for understanding how technology-mediated relationships can complement face-to-face interactions in developing critical reflection, empathy, and social action in social work practice. Approaches such as digital anthropology (Horst & Miller, 2012) and virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) could be instrumental in analysing the relational dynamics that emerge in online learning environments. These methodologies propose optimising online tools to support dialogue-based education, ensuring that online learning environments adhere to social work's values and principles of emancipatory pedagogy, particularly within the South African context. Such research would help refine the balance between online and in-person components, ensuring that both contribute meaningfully to the transformation of social work education.

Implications for Higher Education in South Africa

The findings of this study offer fundamental implications for the broader higher education system in South Africa, especially in how online learning can be implemented in a way that promotes equity and inclusivity. During the pandemic, the digital divide exposed significant structural inequalities, with marginalised students facing barriers to technology access and online participation. However, as blended learning becomes the norm again, higher education institutions must address these inequities to afford opportunities for students who continue to experience systematic exclusion due to inequalities within South Africa and the higher education system.

The author asserts that higher education institutions must critically assess the cultural and linguistic biases in teaching and learning. The shift to blended learning presents an opportunity to create more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments centred on students' lived experiences. Key factors in this transformation include implementing multilingual educational technologies that support the linguistic diversity of South African students, ensuring that language barriers do not hinder their ability to engage in critical dialogues and epistemological reflection, and ensuring epistemic freedom and cognitive justice. This study shows that the groundwork laid by Freire (1970) can be an essential vehicle towards this, coupled with the findings from this research.

The study further highlights the need for a decolonial approach to blended learning in South African higher education. Institutions must move away from Western-centric pedagogical models and design blended learning frameworks that reflect local epistemologies and indigenous knowledge systems. This aligns with Mabasa-Manganyi and Ntshangase (2021); Mbembe's (2016) call for the decolonisation of knowledge and higher education system, which is particularly relevant in developing Social Work education that centres on the lived experiences of South Africa's diverse communities.

9.6. Conclusion

This research provided a comprehensive exploration of how COVID-19-induced online learning impacted emancipatory education for social work students within the context of South African higher education. By engaging with critical elements of emancipatory pedagogy, such as epistemological dialogues, Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC), and Transformative Critical Action (TCA), the study revealed significant limitations in online learning's ability to cultivate critical consciousness and transformative social action, particularly for students from marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds. These findings underscored the persistent socio-economic inequities in South African education, which were further exacerbated during the pandemic's rapid shift to online learning platforms.

The study's findings contribute to the growing discourse on how emancipatory education can shape social work pedagogy in South Africa. It highlights the necessity of embedding pedagogical practices within the socio-historical and cultural contexts of students, ensuring that education is not only academically rigorous but also contextually relevant. The research emphasises the importance of fostering learning environments that actively promote critical engagement and facilitate the development of TCC and TCA, both crucial for empowering students to enact meaningful change in their communities.

In addition to addressing the limitations of the current online education model, this study calls for a reimagining of blended learning approaches that balance the strengths of digital platforms with the essential components of face-to-face, practical, and experiential learning. Higher education institutions must prioritize strategies that advance the goals of transformative education while addressing the diverse needs of their student populations, particularly in the post-pandemic landscape. In doing so, social work education can better equip students with the tools needed to engage critically with their surroundings and act as agents of social change. This research thus broadens the conversation on how higher

education and social work academia in South Africa must evolve to create more equitable, inclusive, and transformative learning experiences.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

University of KwaZulu- Natal

College: Humanities

School: Applied Human Sciences

Discipline: Social Work

Doctor of Philosophy (Human Sciences)

Topic: A mixed methods study on the impacts of Online learning during COVID-19 on the Envisioned Emancipatory Social Work Education at a South African University.

Instruction: In the following sections, please tick on the most applicable.

Part 1: Sociodemographic

1. What is your age from your last birthday:

   ☐

2. Please indicate your Gender

   Male

   ☐

   Female

   ☐

   Choose not to reveal

   ☐

   Other

   ☐

3. Please tick your Population group:

African

☐

Colored

☐

Indian/Asia

☐

White

☐

4. Please indicate your Geographic location:

Rural

☐

Semi-Urban/Township

☐

Urban

☐

5. Please indicate your or family's Economic status/class:

Lower Class

☐

Middle Class

☐

Upper Class

☐

6. Please indicate your year of enrollment:

First-year

☐

Second year

☐

Third Year

☐

Fourth Year

☐

Part 2: Learning During COVID-19: Online learning

7. Please Indicate how many years you have learned via online learning

   One Year

   ☐

   Two Years

   ☐

   Three years

   ☐

   More than Three Years

   ☐

8. Please indicate your preferred method for learning

   Online Learning

   ☐

   Blended/Face to Face learning

   ☐

9. How often were you able to access online platforms (zoom, Microsoft teams) per month?

Never

☐

1 to 3 Classes

☐

4- 8 Classes

☐

9- 13 Classes

☐

14 classes and above

☐

10. Did you have any connectivity/Network issues while learning online?

Yes

☐

No

☐

11. Was your home environment permissive and supportive of online learning?

Yes

☐

No

☐

12. Did you have adequate/ enough resources such as data for online learning purposes?

Yes

☐

No

☐

13. Which device where you most likely to use for your learning?

No access to a device

☐

Laptop/Desktop

☐

Smartphone

☐

Part 3: Binary Scale on Use of Epistemological Dialogues (ED) during Online Learning (OL)

Item	Yes	No
14. During online learning, we had debates about social, economic, and political issues		
15. During online learning, we engage in dialogues about current affairs		
16. During online learning, we had discussions about the taught subject matters		
17. During online learning, we participated in our learning (asking and answering questions)		
18. Online learning provided a space for us to reflect on our history and experiences		
19. Online learning provided us an opportunity to critically review current issues in South Africa		
20. During online learning, we used videos to learn and we were able to engage and analyses these		
21. During online learning assessment used required us to critically engage and apply theory and practice		
22. Online learning promotes student-teacher collaboration (Collaborative learning)		

23. Online learning education is centered on the teacher		
24. Online learning education is centered on students		

Part 4: Epistemological Dialogues (ED) & Critical Consciousness (CC) Scale

Items	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very Likely
25. Debates about social/political & economic issues allow me to be critical					
26. The use of dialogues allows me to be critical of social, political, and economic affairs					
27. Use of discussions about current affairs expands my knowledge and critical thinking					
28. When reflecting on my history and experiences I can gain a different and critical reviewed perspective					
29. Using videos during learning broadened my thinking and analytic skills					
30. Participation through the use of questions in class helps me learn better and gain a greater understanding					
31. Assessments that require the application of knowledge and theory are useful in my learning					
32. The use of dialogical inquiry assists me to gain critical thinking					
33. Because of epistemological dialogues, I am confident, that I can incorporate my learning into practice and everyday living					
34. Epistemological dialogues allow me to gain critical reflective skills					

Part 5: Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC) Scale

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
35. All racial/ethnic groups have the same opportunities in South African Society.					
36. Some ethnic and racial groups are simply inferior to others					
37. Inferior ethnic/racial groups should stay in their place					

38. We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally					
39. All racial and ethnic groups should be equal					
40. Social Work students have a role to play in ensuring equal access/opportunities in all spheres of the country					
41. Social work students can assist people to speak about injustices					
42. It is important for me as a Social Work student to be aware of what is happening around the world					
43. Social Work students can solve social, political, and environmental issues					
44. As a Social Work student, I can play a major role in ending discrimination in all spheres of our country					
45. I am not concerned about political and economic affairs					
46. I can contribute toward ending women, children, and elderly abuse					
47. People from the LGBTQIA community should be treated equally					
48. Individuals within South Africa Should have equal opportunities					
49. Social Work students should be concerned with advocating for disadvantaged people					
50. There is no way I can change a community, rules will always be rules and the cultural norms should never be dismantled.					

Part 6: Transformative Critical Action (TCA) Scale

	Strongly disagree	Disagrees	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. In the past two years, I have participated in advocacy for the rights of the LGBTQIA community					

2. In the past two years, I have contributed toward ending women, children, and elderly abuse					
3. In the past two years, I have engaged in social action to address discrimination and racism					
4. In the last two years, I voted for the political party that I believe will be at the front in addressing social ills					
5. In the past two years, I have confronted someone who was racist or prejudice					
6. In the past two years during online learning, we engage in social action					
7. In the past two years, I confronted someone who was being sexist					
8. In the past two years, I have signed or emailed a petition in addressing social injustices					
9. In the past two years, I have engaged in the online movement toward addressing social inequality					
10. In the past two years, I have worked on a political campaign					
11. With what I have learned I am confident I can contribute to addressing social ills and injustices					
12. I have all the necessary skills towards addressing inequalities					
13. In the past two years, I have reported injustices and discrimination					
14. In the past two years, I have been equipped with practical knowledge and I have utilized this toward bettering the lives of others					
15. I have taken initiative towards the advocacy of equal cultural and religious rights.					

THE END

Appendix 2

Interview Schedule

Title of the study: A mixed methods study on the impacts of Online learning during COVID-19 on the Envisioned Emancipatory Social Work Education at a South African University

Section One: Socio-Demographics

Age:

Population group:

Geographic location:

Economic status:

Level of study

Cohort:

Section Two- Semi- Structured interview Guide

Objectives	Factors to explore
1. To determine the extent to which epistemological dialogues were utilised and establish how these were used during online learning in Social Work education.	- Class participation - Engagement debates and dialogues - Assessments (case studies, assignments, and tests) - Analysis of videos and case studies - Analysis of current affairs
2. To determine the extent to which Social Work students developed critical consciousness (i.e., transformative critical consciousness [TCC] and transformative critical action [TCA]) and explore the impact of online on the development of critical consciousness.	- Critical education (development and understanding) - Praxis - Social engagements and social justice - Understanding of emancipatory methods.
3. To investigate the mediating role of epistemological dialogues on the relationship between online learning and the development of critical consciousness and establish how epistemological dialogues contributed towards critical consciousness during online learning in South Africa.	- Contribution of epistemological dialogues on critical consciousness - Evidence and nature of epistemological dialogues on online learning - Role of epistemological dialogues on the relationship between online learning and critical consciousness

Appendix 3

CODE BOOK

UNIVERSITY OF KWA-ZULU NATAL

HOWARD COLLEGE CAMPUS

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

SCHOOL OF APPLIED HUMAN SCIENCES

DISCIPLINE OF SOCIAL WORK

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (HUMAN SCIENCES): SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

A mixed methods study on the impacts of Online learning during COVID-19 on the Envisioned Emancipatory Social Work Education at a South African University.

CODE BOOK

QUESTION	VARIABLE NAME	CODES	COMMENTS
Part 1: Sociodemographic Information			
1. What is your age from your last birthday?	Interval/Scale	Numeric values	
2. Please indicate your Gender	Nominal	1=Male 2= Female	
3. Please tick your population group	Nominal	1=African 2=Coloured 3=India/ Asian 4= White	

4. Please indicate your geographic location	Nominal	1-=Rural 2=Semi-urban/Township 3=Urban	
5. Please indicate your family's income status/class	Ordinal	1=Lower Class 2= Middle Class 3= Upper class	
6. Please indicate your year of enrollment	Ordinal	1= First Year 2= Second Year 3= Third Year 4= Fourth Year	
Part 2: Learning during COVID-19: online learning			
7. Please indicate How many years you have learned via online learning	Ordinal	1= One year 2= Two Years 3= Three Years 4= More than 3 Years	
8. Please indicate your preferred method of learning	Nominal	1= Online Learning 2= Blended/Face-to-Face learning	
9. How often were you able to access online learning platforms (Zoom, and Microsoft teams) per month	Interval/Scale	1=Never 2= 1-3 classes 3= 4-8 classes 4= 9- 13 classes 5= 14 classes and above	
10. Did you have any connectivity/network issues while learning online?	Nominal	1= Yes 2= No	
11. Was your home permissive and supportive of online learning	Nominal	1= Yes 2= No	

12. Did you have adequate/enough resources such as data for online learning purposes?	Nominal	1= Yes 2= No	
13. Which device where you most likely to use for your learning?	Nominal	1= No access to a device 2= Laptop/Desktop 3= Smartphone	

Part 3: Binary Scale on Use of Epistemological Dialogues (ED) during Online Learning (OL) (nominal)		
Item	Yes	No
14. During online learning, we had debates about social, economic, and political issues	1	2
15. During online learning, we engage in dialogues about current affairs	1	2
16. During online learning, we had discussions about the taught subject matters	1	2
17. During online learning, we participated in our learning (asking and answering questions)	1	2
18. Online learning provided a space for us to reflect on our history and experiences	1	2
19. Online learning provided us an opportunity to critically review current issues in South Africa	1	2
20. During online learning, we used videos to learn and we were able to engage and analyses these	1	2
21. During online learning assessment used required us to critically engage and apply theory and practice	1	2
22. Online learning promotes student-teacher collaboration (Collaborative learning)	1	2
23. Online learning education is centered on the teacher	1	2
24. Online learning education is centered on students	1	2

Part 4: Epistemological Dialogues (ED) & Critical Consciousness (CC) Scale (ordinal)					
Items	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very Likely
25. Debates about social/political & economic issues allow me to be critical	1	2	3	4	5
26. The use of dialogues allows me to be critical of social, political, and economic affairs	1	2	3	4	5
27. Use of discussions about current affairs expands my knowledge and critical thinking	1	2	3	4	5
28. When reflecting on my history and experiences I can gain a different and critical reviewed perspective	1	2	3	4	5
29. Using videos during learning broadened my thinking and analytic skills	1	2	3	4	5
30. Participation through the use of questions in class helps me learn better and gain a greater understanding	1	2	3	4	5
31. Assessments that require the application of knowledge and theory are useful in my learning	1	2	3	4	5
32. The use of dialogical inquiry assists me to gain critical thinking	1	2	3	4	5
33. Because of epistemological dialogues, I am confident, that I can incorporate my learning into practice and everyday living	1	2	3	4	5
34. Epistemological dialogues allow me to gain critical reflective skills	1	2	3	4	5

Part 5: Transformative Critical Consciousness (TCC) Scale (ordinal)					
Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
35. All racial/ethnic groups have the same opportunities in South African Society.	1	2	3	4	5
36. Some ethnic and racial groups are simply inferior to others	1	2	3	4	5
37. Inferior ethnic/racial groups should stay in their place	1	2	3	4	5
38. We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally	1	2	3	4	5
39. All racial and ethnic groups should be equal	1	2	3	4	5

40. Social Work students have a role to play in ensuring equal access/opportunities in all spheres of the country	1	2	3	4	5
41. Social work students can assist people to speak about injustices	1	2	3	4	5
42. It is important for me as a Social Work student to be aware of what is happening around the world	1	2	3	4	5
43. Social Work students can solve social, political, and environmental issues	1	2	3	4	5
44. As a Social Work student, I can play a major role in ending discrimination in all spheres of our country	1	2	3	4	5
45. I am not concerned about political and economic affairs	1	2	3	4	5
46. I can contribute toward ending women, children, and elderly abuse	1	2	3	4	5
47. People from the LGBTQIA community should be treated equally	1	2	3	4	5
48. Individuals within South Africa Should have equal opportunities	1	2	3	4	5
49. Social Work students should be concerned with advocating for disadvantaged people	1	2	3	4	5
50. There is no way I can change a community, rules will always be rules and the cultural norms should never be dismantled.	1	2	3	4	5

Part 6: Transformative Critical Action (TCA) Scale (ordinal)					
Items	Strongly disagree	Disagrees	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
51. In the past two years, I have participated in advocacy for the rights of the LGBTQIA community	1	2	3	4	5
52. In the past two years, I have contributed toward ending women, children, and elderly abuse	1	2	3	4	5

53. In the past two years, I have engaged in social action to address discrimination and racism	1	2	3	4	5
54. In the last two years, I voted for the political party that I believe will be at the front in addressing social ills	1	2	3	4	5
55. In the past two years, I have confronted someone who was racist or prejudice	1	2	3	4	5
56. In the past two years during online learning, we engage in social action	1	2	3	4	5
57. In the past two years, I confronted someone who was being sexist	1	2	3	4	5
58. In the past two years, I have signed or emailed a petition in addressing social injustices	1	2	3	4	5
59. In the past two years, I have engaged in the online movement toward addressing social inequality	1	2	3	4	5
60. In the past two years, I have worked on a political campaign	1	2	3	4	5
61. With what I have learned I am confident I can contribute to addressing social ills and injustices	1	2	3	4	5
62. I have all the necessary skills towards addressing inequalities	1	2	3	4	5
63. In the past two years, I have reported injustices and discrimination	1	2	3	4	5
64. In the past two years, I have been equipped with practical knowledge and I have utilized this toward bettering the lives of others	1	2	3	4	5
65. I have taken initiative towards the advocacy of equal cultural and religious rights.	1	2	3	4	5

THE END

Appendix 4

Gate Keepers Letter

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

20 July 2022

Mr Zwelisha Mfishi (SN 215042167)
School of Applied Human Sciences
College of Humanities
Howard College Campus
UKZN
Email: 215042167@stu.ukzn.ac.za Zibanes@ukzn.ac.za

Dear Mr Mfishi

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), towards your postgraduate degree, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

"Scaling the impacts of Online Learning during COVID-19 on the Envisioned Emancipatory Social Work Education at a South African University."

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting interviews with Social Work students (Zoom, Skype or telephone interviews recommended) on the Howard College campus.

Please ensure that the following appears on your notice/questionnaire:

- Ethical clearance number;
- Research title and details of the research, the researcher and the supervisor;
- Consent form is attached to the notice/questionnaire and to be signed by user before he/she fills in questionnaire;
- gatekeepers approval by the Registrar.

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using the 'Microsoft Outlook' address book. Identity numbers and email addresses of individuals are not a matter of public record and are protected according to Section 14 of the South African Constitution, as well as the Protection of Public Information Act. For the release of such information over to yourself for research purposes, the University of KwaZulu-Natal will need express consent from the relevant data subjects. Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

Dr KE CLELAND: REGISTRAR

Appendix 5

Ethical Clearance Approval

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

23 November 2022

Zwelisha Mfishi (215042167)
School of Applied Human Sc
Howard College

Dear Z Mfishi,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004970/2022
Project title: A mixed methods study on the impacts of online learning during corona virus pandemic on the envisioned emancipatory social work education at a South African university.
Degree: PhD

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 26 October 2022 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 23 November 2023.
To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Appendix 6

INFORMED CONSENT AND INFORMATION PARTICIPATION SHEET

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

INFORMED CONSENT

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date:

Good day,

My name is Mfishi Zwelisha (215042167@stu.ukzn.ac.za), a Doctoral student in the School of Applied Human Sciences, Social Work discipline at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am conducting the study as part of the Doctor of Philosophy (human science) degree requirements. I intend to study the impact of online learning during COVID-19 on the envisioned Social Work students' emancipatory education at a South African University.

You are invited to participate in this research project. Please read carefully the following sections to have a clear understanding of the purpose of the study, so that you can decide on your participation. If there is something you are unclear about, please do not hesitate to ask me. Thank you for your participation.

The main aim of the study is to study the impact of online learning during COVID-19 the envisioned emancipatory Social Work Education.

You will be required to fill in a questionnaire that will take approximately 30-45 minutes. At a later stage you may be selected to participate in an in-depth interview should you agree, which can take between 45-60 minutes. The research data will be sorted safely with a password for electronic or online usage. It will only be accessible to the researcher and the supervisor. If any other person accesses them, it will only be for academic reasons or through a court order. Your participation in this study will be strictly confidential and anonymous. You are not required to reveal your name or any other identifying information during the interview if you do pseudonym names will be used when writing the transcript as well as the thesis. However, should you feel any negative emotions during the interview please let me know, brief counselling will be conducted and you will be referred to the relevant stakeholders to provide further professional counselling should the emotions persist. Your participation is voluntary, you have a right to withdraw yourself from participating at any stage if needs be and there are no consequences should you decide to withdraw.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number_____).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions, you may contact the researcher at:

Mr. Mfishi Zwelisha

Email address: 215042167@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Contact: 0[redacted]

Or

UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details are as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

CONSENT

I _____ have been informed about the study entitled "A mixed methods study on the impacts of Online learning during COVID-19 on the Envisioned Emancipatory Social Work Education at a South African University" conducted by Mfishi Zwelisha.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at [redacted] / 215042167@stu.ukzn.ac.za

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

_____ _____

Signature of Witness Date