

TECHNOSTRESS OF STUDENTS DURING COVID-19 - A SIGN OF THE TIME?

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Abstract: *University students are considered digital natives but they often have difficulties in the effective integration of information technology (IT) into their study routine. To unravel this puzzle we proposed a model of IT effects on students' well-being, based on the Job Demands-Resources theory, one of the most widely used models of human well-being in organizational contexts. We described three processes affecting students' well-being. A techno-stress process generates strain via an increase in study demands. A techno-enrichment process sparks motivation through the creation of energizing study techno-resources. A dual-nature techno-challenge process sparks motivation but also creates strain. Our elaboration might help to reconcile conflicting findings on the role of IT in remote learning and contribute to a better understanding of the effect of IT on students. The proposed theoretical model might also spark further empirical research and provide guidelines for research on IT use in university learning.*

Keywords: *technostress, IT resources, IT demands, motivation, techno-challenges.*



INTRODUCTION

The implementation of technology in the learning processes in academia started some years ago (Rayan et al., 2017), and it has generated various educational benefits both for teachers and students. On the whole, the percentage of users significantly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2020). Universities were suddenly forced into remote teaching and learning, which led to many disadvantages for teachers (Kulikowski, Przytuła, Sułkowski, 2021a) and students' job outcomes (Kulikowski, Przytuła, Sułkowski, 2021b).

In general, e-learning is considered less productive than face-to-face learning in terms of social competencies and it has not been the most preferred way of studying. Only 10% of international students prefer the 'online only' form of teaching, while blended learning is the most preferred mode, followed by face-to-face learning (Anthony et al., 2020; EDUCAUSE, 2020). Other studies show that according to students, online learning seems to be less effective in remote areas. This happens because communication networks and infrastructure do not adequately support them in online learning (Harefa, Sihombing, 2021) despite the steep penetration of IT tools in all spheres of activity (Remeikiene et al., 2021; Roshchyk et al., 2022). In this regard, successful forms of studying are connected with efforts aimed at finding the balance between online and traditional learning (Jackson & Konczos Szombathelyi, 2022).

The study conducted by Jena (2015) shows that e-learning causes burnout, decreases engagement in learning, results in poor academic performance, and increases intentions to withdraw. During the pandemic and other emergency e-learning situations, the majority of colleges and universities have experienced virtual learning problems (Harefa, Sihombing, 2021; Talidong, Toquero, 2020).

This can lead to “technostress” – a term introduced by Brod (1984) - and defined as an inability to cope with the new computer world technologies in an unhealthy manner. More recent definitions say it is the negative impact of technology on end-users (Tarafdar et al., 2019) or the problem of adaptation that an individual experiences when one is unable to cope with new technology (Upadhyaya, Vrinda, 2021). Several years ago, the problems associated with the use of technology changed from predominantly physical, such as carpal tunnel inflammation, to mental. People began to suffer from mental health problems, e.g., phantom vibration syndrome (Rosenberger, 2015; Shatrughan, 2017) to insomnia due to frequently using screens or classic smartphone addiction (Billieux et al., 2015; Fernández-Villa et al., 2015; Perez et al., 2012; Shechter et al., 2018). The FOMO syndrome may also be mentioned. The acronym comes from the English “Fear of Missing Out”, and describes the fear that we may miss something going on in the world. According to Tarafdar et al. (2007), technostress is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing five components, such as: techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-complexity, techno-insecurity, and techno-uncertainty. More technostress was observed in 2020 compared to previous years (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2021).

RESEARCH GAP

The research on technostress has mainly been focused on the governmental and business sectors (e.g. Ayyagari et al., 2011; Fuglseth, Sørensen, 2014). Also various studies in technostress related to various groups like employees, knowledge workers, employees in their early retirement and older adults (Rasticova et al., 2022). However, given the dynamic changes in the recent years modernizing learning and teaching via ICT (Wang, Li, 2019), this phenomenon should be also a point of research interest in higher education.

Technostress has been reported among university teachers (Estrada-Muñoz et al., 2021; Penado Abilleira et al., 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, limited research has investigated this issue among the younger generation, in particular university students (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2021; Upadhyaya, Vrinda, 2021). Furthermore, technostress results in psychological and behavioral strains (e.g., academic performance, satisfaction, commitment) among students, that is why it is of great importance to consider this phenomena during “forced” online learning in pandemic (Kader et al., 2020; Qi, 2019).

According to Aziz et al. (2021), university students are often perceived as digital natives and technologically savvy, and are thus expected to be free from technostress (Qi, 2019a; Setyadi et al., 2017). Paradoxically, Alexa (2022) revealed that they still have problems harnessing e-learning’s advantages and integrating them into their study routine. Also, a study of Oladosu et al. (2020) noticed that because students use smart devices they become more technostressed, and this has a negative influence on their learning process. Technostress among students from different countries may be of great concern considering the increasing digitalization of everyday life makes it a cultural norm to use mobile smart devices in daily endeavors (Lepp et al., 2013).

As technostress constitutes emerging challenges for students and HEIs’ management around the globe, this conceptual paper aims to take a closer look at the possible negative but also positive effects of remote learning on students’ strain and motivation. To this end, as a theoretical background, we use the Job Demands-Resources framework (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017) - one of the most widely used stress models adapted to many organizational contexts. Although JD-R was proposed in the work context (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017; Lesener et al., 2019) this model was also successfully used in educational settings (Salanova et al., 2010; Salmela-Aro, 2014; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Stubb et al., 2011; Mahapatra, Pati, 2018) and several previous studies provide evidence that the JD-R theory is a useful framework when analyzing the situation of students (Calderwood, Gabriel, 2017; Clements, Kamau, 2018; Ouwenel et al., 2011; Teuber et al., 2020; Wolff et al., 2014; Zeijen et al., 2021), but has also been used to explain technostress among employees (Mahapatra, Pati, 2018).

In general, the Job Demands-Resources theory postulates that all environmental characteristics can be categorized as job demands or job resources. Job demands are responsible for the health impairment process that leads to energy depletion and strain, whereas job resources initiate a motivational process that leads to well-being and flourishing. In detail, job resources are all “(...) those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that are functional in achieving work goals, reducing job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, or stimulating personal growth, learning, and development” (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017; p.274).

In contrast, job demands refer to “(...) those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs” (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017, p.274). In the remote learning context, demands and resources might be understood as study demands and study resources that arise not from the job but the study in the computer and online environment. Moreover, the various aspects of technostress are important for our discussion. LePine et al. (2005) suggests that a distinction must be made between hindrance and challenge job demands. Hindrance demands refer to those circumstances that create undesirable constraints hampering the attainment of valued goals, e.g., remote learning software malfunctions, whereas challenge demands are defined as circumstances that require effort and create particular costs but also have the potential to stimulate achievement, personal growth, and development, e.g., time pressure to learn new computer skills (see Bakker, Demerouti, 2017; Cavanaugh et al., 2000; Podsakoff et al., 2007). In summary, the JD-R model states that good health and well-being result from a balance between various environmental characteristics. Resources provide students with energy and facilitate study-goal attainment, hindrance demands create obstacles in goal attainment and generate psychophysiological costs, and challenge demands, although they might generate certain costs, lead to personal development and growth.

Due to the increasing role of technology in university teaching and learning during COVID-19, many studies have pointed to the advantages (resources) and disadvantages (demands) of remote learning for students, but in our view, there is still a lack of theoretical integration of various positive and negative effects and that might lead to a better theoretical understanding of the psychological effect of remote learning on students. Therefore, we believed that our attempt might contribute to a better understanding of the conditions in which technostress might have positive and negative impacts on students.

We can pose the question of perception of technostress from a resources perspective, taking into account students as stakeholders of HEIs. In the literature on the subject of technostress, there are more disadvantages or demands (Li, Wang, 2021; Penado Abilleira et al., 2021; Upadhyaya, Vrinda, 2021). By definition, stress is usually interpreted as something negative (Grummeck-Braamt et al., 2021). In HEIs, as in many other sectors, the COVID-19 pandemic was the catalyst of change towards online education but also technostress (Boyer-Davis, 2020; Galvin et al., 2021; Penado Abilleira et al., 2021). However, the research also includes the concept of eustress, i.e., moderate or normal psychological stress interpreted as being beneficial for the experience. In this sense, technostress plays a mobilizing, innovative, and ground-breaking role, leading to a more effective learning and teaching processes (Li, Wang, 2021; Qi, 2019a; Upadhyaya, Vrinda, 2021). The mobilizing role is associated with the need to learn new forms of remote education, acquire the skills to use information and communication tools, and shape cooperative attitudes with the use of e-learning platforms. Such motivation to implement change requires effort and self-discipline from all stakeholders.

From the perspective of students, several advantages of online learning may be highlighted. First of all, online education allows students to acquire new digital competencies that will give them a competitive advantage in the labor market transforming toward telework. Due to these reasons, students are even ready to change their country of study trying to master more advanced skills (Mishchuk et al., 2019) paying attention to university

development tendencies in the perception of higher education quality (Draskovic et al., 2020). Second, online studying is perceived as very comfortable and convenient because of remote access to educators and materials. Third, it gives the possibility of easy and quick assessment together with a more personalized learning process. Fourth, there are much fewer time limits for student learning (Agarwal, Kaushik, 2020). Moreover, the study of Bączek et al., (2021), pointed to some positive effects of online learning such as: learning at own pace, the ability to stay at home in comfortable surroundings, easy access to online materials.

Remote learning does not allow significant control over the student in the learning and examination processes, which is a source of stress, but at the same time it requires changes and innovations about known and established teaching methods. The use of the possibility of learning in virtual groups, and remote implementation of exercises and tasks leads to the acquisition of new skills. Academic teachers learn to work and do virtual teaching, and students are better prepared to work in the virtual world. By following the trends in the global labor market, it is highly probable that the role of teleworking will become more and more significant in the future and that digital competencies of this kind will serve the development of graduates' careers. The key positive factor is time-saving and lower costs of remote learning compared to traditional ones.

In summary, technostress is a multi-dimensional construct with both negative but as well positive consequences (Ahmad et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2020). Technostress can also take the form of eustress, where students feel motivated by the need to learn new forms of work but are aware of the significant benefits associated with implementing new organizational forms (Shirish et al., 2021; Tarafdar et al., 2019; Weems-Landingham, 2021). It creates innovation in learning processes, saves the time of students, potentially lowers the cost of education, and makes it more accessible from a logistical point of view.

The literature on the subject also provides evidence that several demands lead to technostress for students. Wang et al. (2020) presented five demands that constituted technostress, including techno-overload (ICTs force employees to work faster and longer), techno-invasion, techno-complexity (intensity of social media used during COVID, fear of software malfunction), and techno-insecurity and techno-uncertainty (uncertainty/fear of losing jobs, either because of automation from ICTs or to other people who have a better understanding of ICTs). These stressors may lead to several unintended responses, including work overload, decreased engagement in the organization, reduced job satisfaction, lower productivity, , role ambiguity and role conflict, (Ayyagari et al., 2011; Tarafdar et al., 2011; Tu et al., 2005).

The extensive use of mobile devices by students causes the development of technostress and negatively influences their academic performance and productivity (Essel et al., 2021; Upadhyaya, Vrinda, 2021) because the technological overload and long-term online activity cause exhaustion that affects their capacity to complete homework and study for tests (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2021). Sethi et al. (2022) noticed recently that sessions including exercises, interactions, team projects, discussions, assignments, and examinations have gone online, and this has started in the compulsion of spending more time with technology and digital devices (laptops, mobile phones, desktops, etc.) Raza et al. (2019) added that also cyberbullying, and media multitasking hurt student performance during this forced emergency remote teaching. Al-Abdullatif et al. (2020) found the invasive effect of ICTs on students, and their need to be constantly connected, has a negative effect on their academic

writing skills, including clarity, vocabulary, accuracy, cohesiveness. Additionally, Verkijka (2019) noticed that technostress even had a direct negative influence on both the adoption and continuance of use of digital textbooks by students.

According to Mahapatra and Pati (2018) the complexity associated with ICTs leads to feel inadequate about their computer skills and forces the users to intensify their efforts in learning and understanding it. This specific techno demand negatively affected students' satisfaction and performance expectancy. Thus, reducing the fear of techno-malfunctions could help students to achieve better academic results (Abd Aziz et al., 2021).

Schettino et al. (2022) noticed that technostress can be seen as a risk factor both for students' perceptions of finding a job and for their well-being, but in other study (Choi, Lim, 2016), the social and information technology overload had no direct influence on psychological well-being.

In the study of Baabdullah et al. (2022), students were expected to spend more effort and time developing new skills and competencies in order to cope better with remote learning. This would be another source of stress, hindering the benefits yielded from using various learning applications, and therefore students would be less likely to have positive learning experiences. They also observed a positive correlation between technostress with students' emotional exhaustion.

Considering other psychological outcomes, Zhao et al. (2021) noticed that university students' technostress significantly predicted their learning burnout and that ICT competence alone had no significant effects on technostress. Moreover, administration support seemed to be essential in alleviating students' technostress and burnout. In other study based on gender it was found that females benefited more from support offered by the administration staff in easing learning burnout than males. In contrast, males benefit more from peer support in improving their ICT competence than females. Similarly, according to Upadhaya (2021), female students experienced higher levels of techno-complexity. Higher levels of technostress appeared also among older students, postgraduates, and students with lesser ICT experience.

There are also other students' individual differences, like mobile technology self-efficacy and the extent of ICT usage which may significantly influence technostress (Qi, 2019). Interestingly, Wiyajanti et al. (2021) conducted their research among business students in Indonesia and they noticed that the level of technostress of each individual is different and depends on religious orientation and level of psychological capital (PsyCap). This study suggests that intrinsic religious orientation and PsyCap can encourage individuals to endure challenges and rising demands, thereby reducing the stress caused by technology.

CONCEPTUAL INTEGRATION OF REMOTE LEARNING DEMANDS AND RESOURCES IN TECHNOSTRESS FORMATION

What may be understood from the above-mentioned research studies is that remote learning could have dual effects on students by creating demands and generating technostress, but it also might create positive stress in the form of so-called eustress when remote learning, despite being energy-draining, motivates student to self-develop and learn new competencies. To reconcile this different view on remote learning, i.e., either as a stress generator or as a

motivator for changes and development, in this paper, we draw from the Job Demands-Resources theory (JD-R) to better understand the effects of remote learning on students' well-being and strain.

We suggest that applying the JD-R theory to the remote learning 'technostress' phenomenon can help to build a conceptual model explaining how the positive and negative effects of technostress result from remote learning and what the mechanisms of its influence are on students' motivation and strain. On one hand, remote learning might be seen as a source of hindrance techno-demands, many difficulties that might impede progress in learning and negatively impact students' well-being (e.g., malfunction of the software, fear of missing important social activities when sitting at home instead of being at the campus, ineffective online lectures and classes, the unfairness of online exams, etc). On the other hand, remote learning might be seen as a source of techno-resources that facilitate learning (e.g., it might enable learning during a difficult time like a pandemic, save time due to limiting the need to commute, and allow the fast exchange of study materials, etc.). Moreover, drawing from the JD-R, we also suggest distinguishing not only positive, i.e., techno-resources, and negative, i.e. techno-demands, effects of remote learning but also a third category called techno-challenges. In line with research on human motivation and well-being, challenges are seen as those demanding circumstances that "cost effort but that potentially promote personal growth and achievement" (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, p.277). For example, the need to learn how to use common online communication tools such as Zoom or MS Teams might require effort and cost energy and stress but at the same time might be seen as a motivating experience that leads to the development of new skills necessary in the future workplace. Thus, challenges such as the one described above might simultaneously spark motivation and drain energy. In line with this reasoning, recent studies describe the old concept of eustress (Cavanaugh et al., 2000; Le Fevre et al., 2006) as "positive" stress yielding in techno-eustress, i.e., stress arising from technology that is challenging and motivating (Califf et al., 2020; Chandra et al., 2019; Salazar-Concha et al., 2021; Tarafdar et al., 2019). Recent developments in technology enhancement learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have focused the attention of some researchers on techno-eustress that stems from remote learning. Shirish, Chandra, & Srivastava (2021), have shown that techno-eustress mediates the effect of remote learning on students' performance. In a remote learning context, techno-eustress might refer to a situation in which students perceive demands that stem from information technology as challenges rather than hindrances, thus in line with JD-R theoretical framework, techno-eustress is sparked by the challenging demands and techno-challenges.

Taking into account the various possible effects of remote learning on students, the question arises about what the total effect is of remote learning on students, and what factors might mediate the effect of remote learning on students. We suggest that using the JD-R theory as a theoretical framework might help to integrate the positive and negative effects of remote learning on students and gain insights into a better understanding of remote learning effects on students. We see this integrated approach as important because concentration only on the negative aspects of remote learning may blur the whole picture, only describing technostress caused by technology and transition to an online environment is the simplistic view when ignoring the positive effects of remote learning. The proposed model of the

effects of remote learning on students' motivation and performance that uses the JD-R theory to integrate different possible effects of remote learning is depicted in Figure 1.

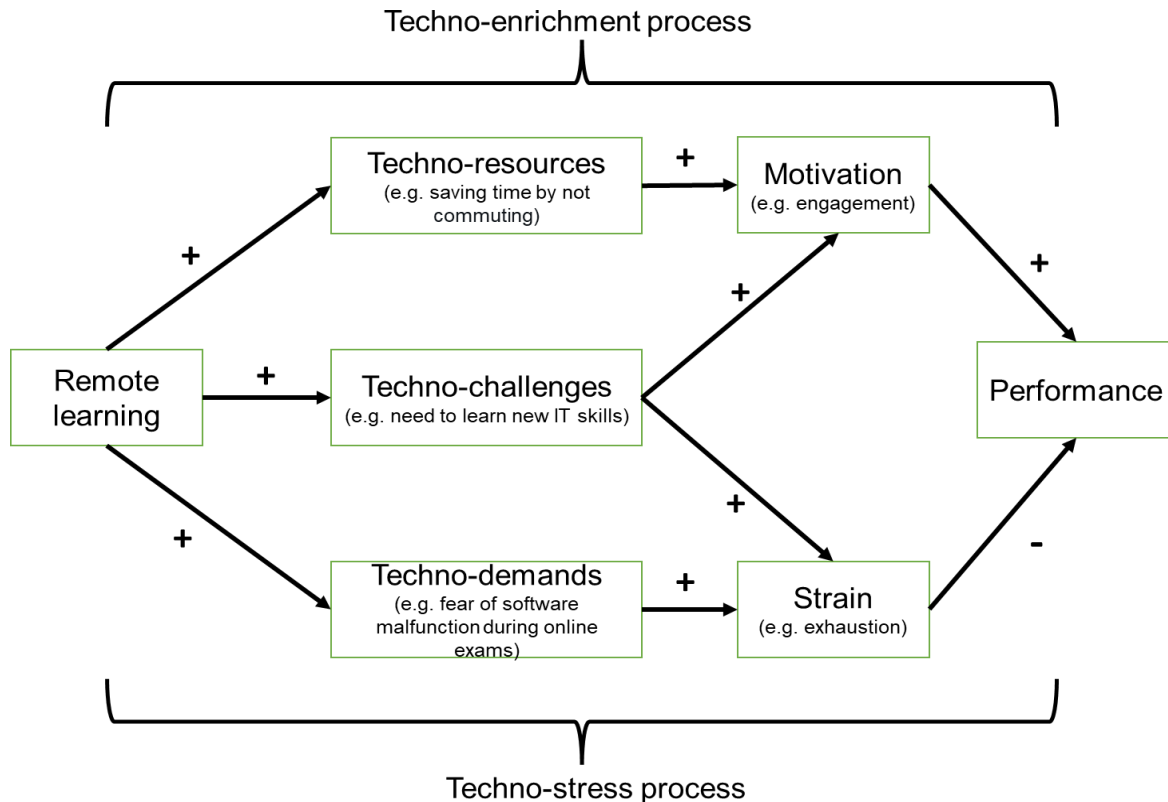


Figure 1. Model of remote learning effects on students' performance mediated by techno-resources, techno-challenges, and techno-demands inspired by the Job Demands-Resources theory. [Bakker & Demerouti, 2017]

The model of possible positive and negative effects of technostress presented in Figure 1 describes three possible effects of remote learning on a performance inspired by the JD-R model. It is important to note that we aim to propose an overarching conceptual framework to understand students' technostress in different technological settings that is independent of particulars of technology used in remote learning. In other words, we suggest that concepts of techno-demands, techno-resources and techno-challenges although might be caused by different specific aspects of technology but on a conceptual level they are similar. E.g. techno-resources are those characteristics of the technology used in the study environment and learning process that help achieve valuable study goals and protect against hindrances and difficulties. As we are not limited to any particular technology, hardware or software, this approach allows establishing a common theoretical background that might be used to better understand students' experience during remote learning in different technological settings but also might spark further theoretical debates providing even more insights in study technostress experiences in remote learning.

First, in line with the JD-R theory, remote learning might generate techno-resources, i.e., social, physical, psychological, or organizational characteristics of the technology used in the study environment and learning process that help achieve valuable study goals, protect against hindrances and difficulties, and their physiological and psychological costs, or promote students learning, and personal development (see Bakker, Demerouti, 2017). Techno-resources that emerge from remote learning (e.g., time-saving on commuting, easy access to course materials) provide energy and increase motivation, thus improving study performance. We propose calling this path from remote learning via techno-resources to improved performance a techno-enrichment process.

Second, remote learning might generate techno-demands, which as adapted from the JD-R concept of job demands to the study environment, and might be described as physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the technology used in the study environment and learning process that need long-lasting physical and/or psychological effort and are therefore generating specific physiological and/or psychological costs (see (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017). Techno-demands (e.g., fear of software malfunction during exams; lack of stable internet connection) drain energy and lead to the development of strain responses and consequently worsened study performance. We suggest calling this path from remote learning via techno-demands to diminished performance a techno-stress process.

Third, remote learning might also generate challenging study demands – techno challenges, that, based on Crawford, LePine, & Rich, (2010) and Bakker & Demerouti (2017), work in the scope of the JD-R model and might be defined as stressful demands steaming from the technology used in the study environment and learning process that have the potential to promote future growth of competency. Students tend to perceive these challenging demands as opportunities to, rather than as a hindrance or difficulty in the learning process. We suggest that techno-challenges that arise from remote learning might influence performance through techno-enrichment and techno-stress processes.

Our conceptual elaboration provides several contributions to a better understanding of the effect of remote learning on student technostress. First, based on the JD-R theory, a well-established model of strain and well-being, we provide a concise description of possible effects of stressors/demands on students that stem from technology. Second, we highlight that remote learning not only generates techno-demand leading to techno-stress but also might have positive effects via techno-resources and techno-challenges. Particularly remote learning might act as a challenging stressor that sparks eustress related to motivation and performance (Lepine et al., 2005). Third, our theoretical model, by highlighting three different results of remote learning, i.e., techno-demands, techno-challenges, and techno resources might help to reconcile conflicting experiences that stem from remote learning. Finally, the proposed theoretical model might not only explain the possible effects of remote learning on students, but also provide a guideline for research seeking an explanation for the mixed response to technology use in learning.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER STUDIES

Our model also opens some fruitful avenues for further research. One of them is the question of which aspects of remote learning might be seen as techno-resources, techno-challenges, and techno-demands. In other words, does remote learning have specific properties that for all students are universally challenging/demanding, or does the perception of challenges or demands depend on students' appraisal and coping mechanisms?

Another interesting question is the question of the role of academic staff in the formation of technostress, particularly to what extent academic teachers' and university managers' behavior and attitudes might moderate the effect of remote learning on students. For example, is it possible that under a supportive teacher the aspect of remote learning, e.g., the need to acquire new skills, is perceived by students as a techno-challenge, whereas under an unsupportive teacher the same aspect of remote learning becomes a hindrance to techno-demands?

An intriguing avenue for further research is also the role of techno-challenges, as they are known to be a double-edged sword (see e.g. Crawford et al., 2010). On one hand, they increase motivation, but simultaneously they are positively related to strain. It will be a challenge for further research to solve this puzzle and establish in what circumstances techno-challenges lead to positive effects on motivation and performance, outweighing the negative side effects in the form of energy depletion and strain.

Last but not least, artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms are emerging trends in remote learning. AI is a part of computer science that creates and develops machine systems able to demonstrate behaviors linked to human intelligence. AI algorithms are trained on big data sets from different sources to mimic humans to perform tasks such as learning, planning, knowledge representation, perception and problem-solving. AI technology is used for a wide range of applications, such as automated chatbots for customer service, product recommendations based on a user's habits or speech recognition. Essentially, the purpose of AI is to improve the systems people already use by automating tasks to make them more efficient (Wix Encyclopedia, 2022). At the same time, the usage of AI can cause or increase the risk of technostress. Lastly, the capability of Open AI (<https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt/>), chatGPT based on Generative Pretrained Transformer 3 (GPT-3) is causing a stir on the internet. To illustrate this we ask chatGPT a question "How remote learning might generate technostress among students?" This is a part of the answer generated by AI: *"(...)students may feel overwhelmed by the amount of information they are expected to learn and the need to constantly use technology to access that information. Additionally, students may feel frustrated if they are not familiar with the technology being used for remote learning, or if they do not have access to the necessary technology or support to fully participate in the remote learning experience. Furthermore, remote learning can also create a sense of isolation for students, as they may feel disconnected from their classmates and teachers".* Although this answer is not without flaws it illustrates the capabilities of AI algorithms to produce an imitation of a human-like response containing some thought-provoking ideas. As such we suggest that AI is creating a hotbed for techno-resources and techno-demands for students and teachers in remote learning. In this context, our model of the technostress might be also used to understand how AI will affect students in remote learning. E.g. in terms of

techno-demands, the rise of AI chats might spark uncertainty among students if they receive answers from a trusted source such as a teacher or from AI algorithms build into remote learning platforms. From the perspective of techno-resources, the AI algorithm might check for formal or grammar errors in student essays, leaving more room for concentration on creativity. From the techno-challenge perspective, the use of AI algorithms in remote learning needs a “paradigm shift” in education and openness to use technology in a new way not only as a mindless tool but as a learning facilitator with some capabilities similar to those of human teachers e.g grammatical error correction. AI is an emerging trend and we believe that our model might be used to gain better insights into AI effects on students' technostress in remote learning.

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