HARSHNESS OF THE ONLINE LEARNING": THE JOURNEY OF MALAYSIAN TERTIARY STUDENTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

In 2020 the world was shaken by COVID-19 pandemic that technically changed the way the world works in almost all domains from business, governance, education, and lifestyles. As the pandemic spreads globally, with little signs for improvement, the world has made adjustments to live with the virus. The education sector suddenly shifted from face-to-face and blended learning classes to full online class. This paper explores the experiences of several tertiary students' online learning experiences with two objectives: discovering their initial expectations towards online learning as well as investigating the challenges encountered by the students in online learning. The research design of the current study is a case study involving seven tertiary students who were enrolled in English language degree in a public university in Malaysia. Data were collected through essay and semi-structured interviews. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted using several online platforms. Data was then analysed using a thematic analysis using qualitative data analysis software; Atlas-ti. The findings show that the students had a positive presumption about online learning initially but was struck with the harsh realities of online learning afterwards. Among the challenges they faced were lack of physical touch, solitary learning, and issues with technological aspects. The findings are crucial to understand the obstacles faced by our learners in grasping with online learning, and with this understanding several practical steps can be taken to overcome the said issues.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak has had a huge impact on millions of people. It seems that the current situation places the world on pause. The pandemic has called all of us not to touch others but to isolate ourselves and to maintain a proper physical distance. It also forced the schools and universities to close, impacting an unexpected number of learners around the globe. Malaysia has confirmed that the first case of coronavirus has reached here in late January 2020 (Joseph & Sam, 2020). Strikingly, within a few weeks, Malaysia had recorded the largest cumulative number of confirmed COVID-19 infections in Southeast Asia (The Straits Times, 2020) and the country was placed under a strict movement control order (MCO).

The pandemic has affected the education sector by speeding up the journey towards online learning. University management together with the academicians and IT support teams re-examine the structures to provide immediate support of online learning. University students are exposed to a newer learning gauge. However, the big question is, how prepared are our university students to follow online learning during the pandemic. Sundarasen et al (2020), investigated the psychological impact of COVID-19 and lockdown among students in Malaysia. The study examines the impact on the anxiety level of university students in Malaysia during the pandemic time and the characteristics affecting their anxiety. The results showed that financial constraints, remote online teaching, and uncertainty about the future about academics and career were the main stressors.

There is still a lack of experience about COVID-19 in the world and there are many ongoing scientific studies (Han & Yang, 2020). Given that COVID-19 is a new pandemic, a review of the related literature has found no currently available relevant study that describes the perceptions and experiences of undergraduate English language programme students during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in Malaysia. Therefore, this study is aimed to examine the undergraduate students' experience during pandemic in a public university in Malaysia. This paper will answer the following questions:

(i) What are the Malaysian tertiary students' expectations of the online learning?
(ii) What are the challenges faced by the Malaysian tertiary students in online learning during pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Background

Today, the world is experiencing a deadly infectious disease caused by a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), called coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), is a novel pneumonia disease originating in Wuhan, was confirmed by the World Health Organization on January 12, 2020 before becoming an outbreak in all countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) categorizes the contagion situations caused by COVID-19 as a pandemic because it is a contagious disease spread through the human population and across vast areas, passing through borders of countries and continents, to the rest of the world.

Covid-19 has accelerated the pace of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0)'s educational transformation worldwide. With the closure of learning institutions at all levels, distance learning via online Teaching & Learning becomes the only safe and viable method to ensure learning takes place. In countries where Movement Control Order (MCO) or Lockdowns are enforced, technology can facilitate seamless migration of face-to-face learning to a virtual platform, enabling accessibility to crucial, quality digital content (The Star, March 2020). The impact and extent upon which Covid-19 has suddenly changed our worldview of how things work and

should work seem to reflect what Lamprini and Brochler (2018) anticipated much earlier of what it would take for IR 4.0 to revolutionize the world, "how it can lead to a future that reflects the peoples' common objectives and values on how these advanced technologies can affect the life and transform the economic, social, cultural, and human environment". The Covid-19 pandemic has definitely brought upon us this revolution, whereby collectively, we now see that online learning has become central and deemed the most viable means to provide education for all.

Online Learning: Challenges

Since online learning is new to many people, hence many students all over the world face some challenges going through it during this pandemic. Simamora (2020) in his article titled The Challenges of Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Essay Analysis of Performing Arts Education Students conducted a study in Indonesia. The Indonesian education system, like different sectors of society is also uneven especially due to the pandemic. Some schools in Indonesia are funded and some different schools do not get funding. In practice, many schools cannot do online learning because there is no, or insufficient infrastructure to do it. Furthermore, many students may not be able to learn online as they cannot afford laptop, the internet costs are too high, internet access is poor and internet quotas are insufficient.

Besser et.al. (2020) in their article wrote that Israeli students also had a series of unique challenges that are specific to them. The students have been through multiple past experiences that have required them to adapt and` now they find themselves in a totally unique and uncertain situation that is different from their past experiences. These are students who have spent 3 years in the military beginning at about 19 years of age, followed by a year of work, and then 6 months traveling for "the big travel." Moreover, there is an ongoing exposure to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict including terror attacks that involve negative mental health consequences. In short, these students have experienced a host of novel situations that represent opportunities to be adaptable in general. Students have to concentrate on learning despite it being difficult to do so. The learning and achievements of students are typically underscored by their goals and goal orientations hence it is not easy to maintain a focus on achievement goals when life issues have become pre-dominant. Another significant challenge for students is that because they must now engage in online learning, the daily routines of student life have now totally different.

The sudden shift from traditional classrooms and face-to-face learning to online learning has resulted in a completely different learning experience for students in Pakistan. According to Muhammad & Kainat (2020), lack of access to internet facilities, lack of proper interaction and contact with students and instructors and ineffective technology are among the major challenges faced by higher education students of Pakistan. Majority of the students have reservations about online learning. Most students do not have access to high speed or reliable internet services and are thus struggling with online learning. Owing to the limited resources of educational institutions, only several institutions are able to introduce effective online classes during the initial months of the pandemic.

The online learning has impacted the education sector worldwide, including Malaysia, cutting across all levels: the primary, secondary and even tertiary levels. Many higher education institutions and schools are instructed to be closed due to the pandemic. The pandemic has irrevocably pushed Malaysian schools, higher education institutions and training providers online, in order to ensure that effective learning continues (Chin, 2020) within the safety measures undertaken. In line with this, Special Meeting of Ministers on the Implementation Movement Control Order (MCO) of the National Security Council (NSC) on 16 May 2020 has

approved the proposal of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) that all T&L activities should be conducted online. All face-to-face T&L activities are restricted to only some categories of students who need to return to campus on a regular basis staged to implement T&L in full compliance with Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) set and prioritize safety measures as well as social distancing.

Choong (2020) observes the impact of Covid-19 on Malaysian tertiary students that would result into additional mental stress and financial concerns; culminating into an increased rate of drop-outs, if good social support is not made available. Kumaim et.al (2020) listed work and information overload received from instructors, inadaptability and unfamiliarity of the new online learning and personal health challenges related to stress and anxiety as among the challenges affecting university students in Malaysia. Reports of students' anxieties related to online learning also received focus and attention (Lim, 2020; Menon, 2020). Inadequate learning infrastructure and limited internet accessibility are two main hurdles in the learning of many Malaysian university students, especially those residing in the rural areas (Lee, 2020).

In moderating the prospects and contradictions of online learning for learners, focus need to be directed towards the impacts upon learners and instructors. Both conducting classes and learning online are not hassle-free (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020; Al-Baadani and Abbas, 2020; Sia & Adamu, 2020), there are many issues that need support and rectification. Barriers in the interaction between lecturers and students throughout online teaching posed a significant dissatisfaction among students as they were not able to interrupt the lecturers during the teaching. Also, students expressed dissatisfaction with the group activity conducted online during the pandemic (Selvanathan, Mohamed Hussin and Nor Azazi, 2020).

Chung et.al (2020) posits that the number one challenge of online learning for degree students studying at MARA University of Technology was internet connectivity; followed by problems with attending diverse online methods, limited internet data, slow device functions, difficulty to focus, lack of motivation due to absence of face-to-face interactions, difficulty in understanding content and finally, lack of technical skills in using online learning. Sia & Adamu (2020) also reported that poor internet connectivity is a big issue in online learning, where it is more severe in East Malaysia.

In light of the current developments, UNESCO's findings reveal evidence of good practice, practical tips and links to important references to mitigate the short and longer terms' impacts of educational institutions' closures affecting many countries worldwide. UNESCO (2020) recognized that among the concerns are issues relating to the physical and psychological separation and distance between teachers/instructors and learners, and among peer learners; learners increased sense of autonomy in learning, teachers' decreased opportunities for direct control and supervision during learning sessions. The findings suggest that adjustments of methodologies and formats of formative assessments is important to ensure that all students can take part in the tests or other assessments planned for them. Also, teachers/ instructors should be supported on how to find solutions to common challenges, such as supporting learners overcome distance and engagement, adjusting instructional design to motivate students and maintain engagement, and developing and sharing teaching and learning resources and best teaching practices (UNESCO, April 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the world's economic and social fabric where the traditional face-to-face interactions became potential hazards to health and life itself. It has definitely forced our global education to go online albeit the state of unreadiness faced by many quarters. Malaysian universities are still managing the full-swing of this medium with considerable challenges using a variety of emerging online communication platforms. University students have had to grapple with the switch from the traditional method of face-to-face classes or semi-online curriculum to a full online medium. In this regard, this study will further extend research done on the harsh realities and challenges faced by university students in facing and

managing online instructions and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, the following section would highlight and examine the students' experiences and perceptions towards online learning during the outbreak.

METHODOLOGY

The procedures and methods undertaken for data collections and analyses including the sampling method and respondent identification are presented in this section. The type of data used for analyses and the approaches used when analysing the data are also discussed.

Research design

The technique that we identify as the overarching method for this research is the case study approach. Under this technique or method, we also utilised a number of analytical approaches to collect and analyse the data including content analysis, interview protocol and Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) using computer assisted approach. The case study approach in qualitative research is a popular method and "an effective methodology to investigate and understand complex issues in real world settings" (Harrison et al. 2017, p. 2).

The issue that we are studying can be considered a significant and noteworthy phenomenon effecting the entire world, where students and educational institutions were forced by the COVID-19 pandemic to change the style and approach of teaching and learning almost completely. For case study, a small but focused data size/collection is much valuable than bigger data size that are irrelevant to the case (Crowe et al., 2011). The case study approach can help us understand "individual and shared social meanings" (Crowe et al., 2011), especially those experiencing similar situation like that of a group of students studying during a pandemic crisis in a particular country.

Sampling and population

In order to gather data that is focused and has potential to allow the examination of the phenomenon, the data was collected through purposive sampling. For purposive sampling, or also known as purposeful or qualitative sampling, criterion-based sampling technique is the most commonly used strategies in research (Palinkas et al. 2015). In this study, the criteria for choosing the participants include that they must be students from the same programme and are enrolled in the same classes. Then, the students must have gained at least one semester worth of experience with online learning for their courses taken at their university during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The population selected based on this purposive sampling is nine students currently enrolled in an English language programme at a public university in Malaysia. These students fit all the criteria mentioned above. Since they are taking the same courses they are assumed to be using and familiar with the online tools used at the university which is Microsoft Teams. In terms of adapting to the technical aspect of online learning, they experience the more or less similar challenges when they first learn to use Microsoft Teams (at the onset of the pandemic sometime in March 2020), i.e. semester February-May 2020, and together they utilised the online learning tools required by their courses when the online learning was implemented 100% by their university during the October 2020-February 2021 semester. In other words, these students have undergone similar journey for the continuation of their education. Their experience and how they face these challenges will become an invaluable knowledge and a type of feedback that is useful especially for educators and universities to leverage in order to improve the service provided by the education sectors that are currently run fully online. This is in line with Malaysia's aspiration to become a world class education hub which caters to the needs of the customers i.e. students, parents and stakeholders.

Data collections and procedures

Two types of data are used to explore and investigate the answers to the research questions. The first type of data set is written essays provided by the students while the second type of data set is input from interviews with the students.

In order to get a general overview of the student responses, an essay writing competition was held where all students from the population were encouraged to participate. Next, these essays were analysed through content analysis and thematic analysis where ideas written by the students in the essays were categorized to identify recurring themes. Next, based on the themes derived from the essays, questions for a semi-structured interview were formulated. Four male students and three female students were identified and interviewed by members from the research team. The interviews were conducted in two ways. Some of the students were interviewed through video calls (e.g. Google Meet, Microsoft Teams video conference function), while some responded via WhatsApp application. A snapshot of the text messages collected through WhatsApp can be seen in the figure below:
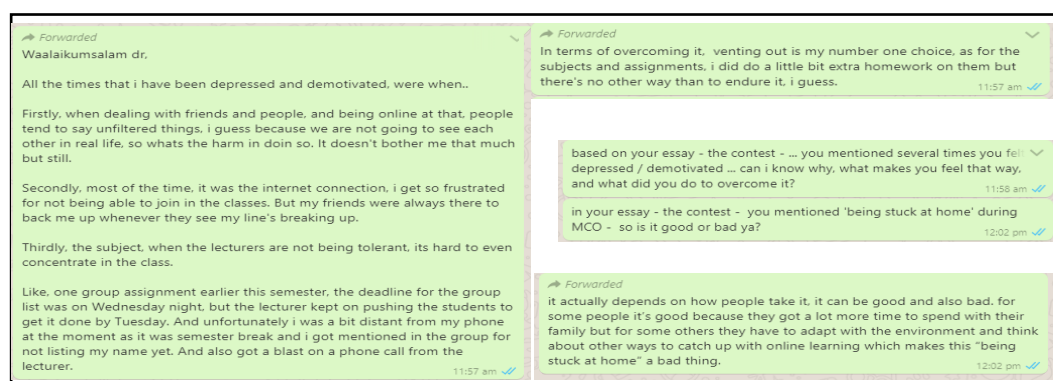

Figure 1.1: WhatsApp text messages between a member of the research group and a student

In total, seven students gave their consent to be interviewed by the research team including four males (pseudonyms: Andy, Eddie, Dean, Eric) and three females (Hannah, Nasrin, Nadine). Most of the students interviewed were students who voluntarily submitted an essay for the essay writing competition. That is why in Figure 1.0, we can see a question like this: "based on your essay…" being asked by the interviewer. These interview sessions, especially those recorded during video calls, were transcribed, and prepared for the analyses phase.

Analysis procedure: student's essays and interview transcripts

As mentioned before, when analysing the student essays, content analysis method was used to identify recurring themes. First, three members from the research team analysed the essays on their own and came up with the themes. Next, these themes were presented and discussed with all the six members of the research team, where they compared and contrasted all the themes and decided the best categories that accurately represents the recurring themes.

When analysing the student essays, themes were identified by undertaking content analysis which is done manually by reading the essays one by one, but with the interview transcripts, the themes were identified by utilising a computer assisted language analysis approach.

To triangulate the findings about the recurring themes found in the essays, it is important to investigate and identify whether or not similar themes occur in the interview transcripts. In order to carry out the analysis, we used a type of qualitative data analysis (QDA) software

called Atlast ti (Hwang, 2008). It is also known as computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) (Hwang, 2008; Friese et al. 2018).

Atlas.Ti is useful in sorting and visualising the findings for the presentation of the results. The same visualisations also are used during the discussion of experts (members in the research team) when finalising the themes. The figure below shows how after manual tagging and identification of meaningful categories, the excerpts from different respondents were collated by Atlast.Ti software. Using this report, expert discussion was undertaken, and themes were generated.
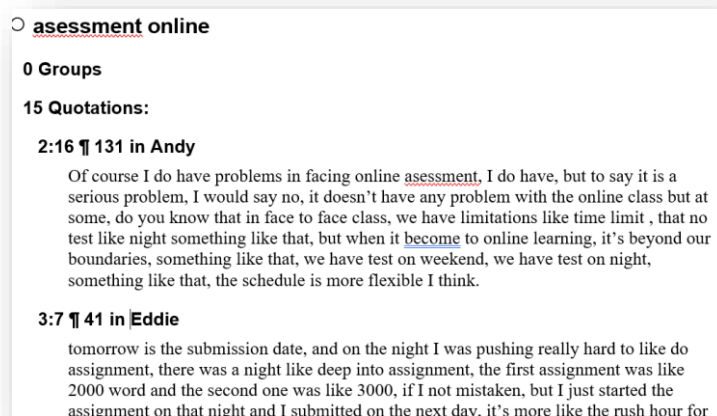

Figure 1.2: The excerpts from different respondents collated by Atlast.ti

Data gathering activities are outlined and the analytical procedures are described thoroughly in this section. Through rigorous investigation of the data (student essays and interview transcripts), we were able to triangulate and identify the most relevant themes that answers the research questions in this study. The themes will be presented next in the results and discussions section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section will discuss the findings of the current study focussing on two main themes: the initial response and challenges towards online learning. This paper will label the section according to the in-vivo codings used during the analysis. The first theme on the students' initial responses will discuss their preconceptions on how online learning would be and later how their expectations changed based on the realities of online learning. The second theme will look at "harshness of the online learning"; as one of the participants put it, such as lack of physical presence and space, solitary learning, technological issues and monetary. The main themes and sub-themes in the current paper can be mapped as follows:
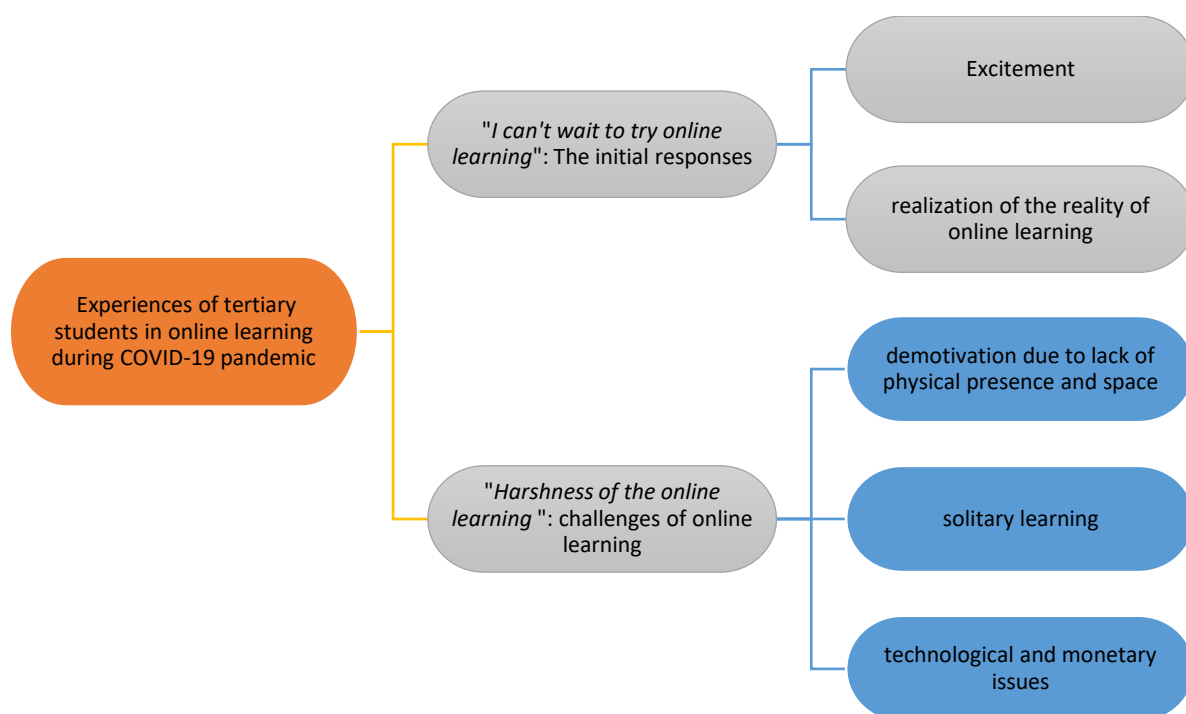
"I can't-wait-to-try-online-learning": The initial responses.

Data shows that the students had positive viewpoints towards online learning at the beginning. Many equates online learning to their contemporary lifestyle such as watching online videos in familiar platform such as YouTube and using the latest technological gadgets. Andy mentioned that he had the preconception that the learning process will be similar to the delightful experience when watching their favourite videos in YouTube and he expressed that he was quite excited to see his lecturers in videos. He stated that " *Ya, at first, I think it will be quite entertaining, like you just open the lecture, and it is like you are watching you tube right? But in academic way. At first moment, I thought it is just like I learn something on you tube, something like that, but instead of other people , it is just our lecturers, not a random person that you watch on you tube*" (Int 2:2). Eric shared Andy's enthusiasm as he was excited to learn in an online environment due to his likings of technological gadgets. He wanted to utilize the latest gadgets in the learning process. He said that "*Actually the first thing that I felt... like, I can't wait to try online learning, the online environment. I like tech, I like technology, I like gadget, so being able to capitalize this gadget, this software that they are talking about out there, like in online class. I was thinking , how cool is it. At that stage I said to myself that it is going to be fun, you know*" (Int 9:1 Eric).

In addition, some students thought that learning at home would make learning easier especially in the times of the pandemic. This point is mirrored in several studies (Dhawan, 2020; Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj, & Sethi, 2020) as many students loved the flexibility that online learning. Eddie saw it as a relief as he was sick at the beginning of MCO and he was afraid that he could contract the disease. Eddie really welcomed the idea of online learning as he felt much safer as learning online means being away from the threats of COVID-19. He stated that:

> "*okay, first thing first, around that time I think I was sick, I was having a cold, so I was like relieved because we are going to start online learning, ya I was sick at the time. And I was quite scared about the covid 19 because just, the pandemic has just started … and the doctor said I was just having a regular fever. I was scared at that time. I was like okay, we'll be starting the online class, the risk will be lower, so I was relieved*" (Int 3:1, 3:2).

Dean and Nadine also thought that learning will be much easier at home. Dean initially celebrated the idea of online learning as he liked staying at home and he deduced that learning at home should provide a pleasant experience. He mentioned that "*At first, I was so excited. Because I really like home, so, learning at home is so good*" (Int 8:1). Similarly, Nadine expected learning to be a breeze as she liked being home . She said that "*For me at first, umm, I think online learning is quite easy to handle because I am at home*" (Int 7:6).

However, as they were moving into the online learning atmosphere, they were starting to feel differently towards online learning. Most students expressed that the reality of online learning surpasses their initial expectations. Eddie mentioned that as time goes by, he started to feel the "harshness" of online learning. He said that "*And when the time goes on and it started to be more boring, it was harder to study, ya, I feel the harshness of ODL*" (Int 3:3). Eric, who were excited at the opportunity of using gadgets, had made sure that he was well-prepared in terms of having the right technological appliances to support his online learning. But, after experiencing online learning he discovered that online learning is different from the traditional face-to-face classroom in so many ways. He stated that:

> "*Actually, before I started, I have prepared everything, I made sure that I have good internet connection, sometimes the line is okay, sometimes it is not. I made sure I have around 70-80% connection. Then, I have gadgets, but, I did not expect in terms of focus, I mean it is different in terms of focus , in face to face or online or visual or online video. Because they are very different*" (Int 9:2).

In addition, Andy also expressed that after some time he noticed that learning an online environment was harder as it required more concentration and more energy as compared to the traditional classroom. He found himself drowning in the new demands of the online learning when he said that "*After a while, I said.. OMG…so online learning, it is more demanding, energy draining I must say because in class (traditional face-to-face class), we have no choice except to really listen to that class, but online class of course the distraction is here and there, and if we don't listen it well, so ya, we might miss certain things. I was like ,what? what was that?*" (Int 2:6). Dean and Nadine also mentioned that after some time, they realized that online learning was not as easy as the had assumed earlier. Dean said "*At first, I was so excited. Because I really like home, so, learning at home is so good. But, after two weeks I realized it was difficult (to learn)*" (Int 8:1). Nadine said that she was oblivious to the challenges of online learning before , but after sometime , she started to feel the burden "*But, now I think it's now I feel like it is kinda hard. At first I didn't feel the burden but now I feel the burden of learning online because it's hard to communicate with just Whatsapp or online something like that*" (Int 7:7).

In short, the findings show that the participants had a positive presumption about online learning for several reasons; however, after a period of learning using the online platform, they began to notice the difficulties of the learning process. The participants were quite excited in exploring online learning as they were associating the process to their own experience in engaging with online materials and technological gadgets. Some assumed that the process would ease their learning matters especially in the times of pandemic. Nonetheless, after going through the learning process using online platforms, they grasped the reality and challenges of online learning. These challenges will be discussed further in the following section.

"Harshness of the online learning ": challenges of online learning

One theme that emerges from our analysis is the **feeling of demotivation due to the lack of physical presence and space**. Although some may view this positively in light of being more flexible (Dhawan, 2020; Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj, & Sethi, 2020), others have found that they lack the motivation in undergoing their studies. Eddie for example, felt discouraged as he thought that online learning lacks physical movement that could influence him to commit to his classes as he said that… *it is more like the pressure is not there ... we can have the pressure when somebody doing it ... (now) we were like demotivated*" (Int 3.8). Eddie explained:

> "*I think, it is different from face-to-face classes because when, on ODL (online) classes, I think like after the, for example after the 3 hours class, when we are at home, the bed is just right behind us, so it's nothing else to do, no exercise at all, we can just stand up, go to bed and sleep. For the face-to-face class like when we end our class, we have to walk our way to our college, or anything, so it's like, it is refreshing. I think ODL give me a lack of exercise, lack of physical movement*" (Int 3:23).

Eric agreed with Eddie as he also mentioned that the physical activities in campus and the university ecosystem became his source of motivation to learn. In an online learning classroom setting that involved limited movement from the bathroom to the bedroom, seems a bit demotivating. He said that "*You have the element of the 'university' when you have face to face class, you have that kind of the spirit . Okay we wake up, shower and then go to class , you kinda have that aura, the environment of it. But the online class, you wake up in your room, you go to shower and then you go back to your room, it's kind of difficult; the environment do not motivate you*" (Int 9:3).

Like Eddie and Eric, Dean feels that online learning makes him physically unprepared and thus mentally unprepared too. He said, "*If going to [physical] class, my body moves a lot, 7.30 am I am already walking to class, [but now], my mind, brain is not set*" (8.11). This point is also supported by Andy when he stressed the importance of having physical touch in the learning process. In contrast to online learning where a student is confined to a small private space, the traditional face-to-face learning involved a lot of physical actions such as getting ready for class, walking to class from the residential colleges and searching for classrooms, and in a way these physical movements helped the students to coordinate their learning process better. It seems that the participants associated physical activities to mental preparation for the learning process. Andy said that "*I love the flexibility of the online class but not always work in that way. When we want to be productive, we need some kind of physical attachment to that, if we go to the classes, we have to move, we have to go to classes or something like that. I like online class for the flexibility, but it lacks the physical touch*" (Int 2:24). The need to the similarities and physical touch in the traditional face-to-face classroom is also noted by Nur Salina Ismail, Nor Mazlina Abu Bakar, Sharifah Wajihah Wafa Syed Saadun Tarek Wafa (2020) where their participant showed uneasiness in going through physical distancing required in the online learning.

Another challenge faced in going through the online learning process is that the process is somewhat **a solitary process**. Students feel that they are 'alone' in shouldering their studies workload; thus, some see this as a demotivating factor. Andy missed the social interaction and end-of-class discussions in the face-to-face classroom as he mentioned "*So, that one is missing, the interaction, the physical touch is missing*" (Int 2:36). He explained in great length about the importance of social interaction in the learning process. He said that *"… when we learn*

something, for example we learn like this (online), so like…when we talk to our friends online after class, if we interact like that, oh, we can do this together, but after that it ends. It is more like support we have in learning … it's not as the same way as face-to face-class" (Int 2:28). Eddie agreed with this point as he explained why he needed his peers in the learning process. If Andy valued the interaction and discussion among peers that usually happens after class, Eddie needed his friends to him the sense of purpose and discipline in adhering to his learning commitments. He said that " *But I think I need my friends. I need the presence of my friend, my peers to push me to do my assignment, study, I think I need them to push me harder. Not like that they pushed me that hard before, but like just I said, when they study, I study"* (Int 3:40). Peer interactions is important in the learning process in general and in the online learning during the pandemic, many studies (Daniel, 2020; Heng & Sol, 2020; Ismail et.al, 2020) corroborate with this finding as they highlighted that the online learning during the pandemic put a limitation towards peer interaction thus creating stress among students. Ashraf et al., (2021) highlighted similar point when they said that exiguous peer interaction has put a strain on the learning of higher education students in Pakistan.

It seems that the interaction between classmates and peers has metamorphosized into online texts and video calls. Surprisingly, that particular interaction mode, which is predominantly apparent in their current lifestyle, is deemed inadequate to help the participants in their learning process. Eddie was having a tough time in communicating with classmates especially in discussing groupwork assignments. He said that the students resorted to using text messages to communicate each other because it was the cheaper option as most video conferencing platform used more data as evidenced in this excerpt *" most of us use whatsApp but sometimes we do use Microsoft teams, but I think Microsoft Teams needs more data"* (Int 3:11). According to him, the communication through text messages was a bit distorted as some messages were left unanswered and some were answered the following day; as a result, he felt dispirited to continue working on the assignment. *"So like when we are discussing right now, I send a message and then just blue tick (on WhatApp, indicating that the message has been read by the receiver) or some of them like reply the next day. I think there is a lack of commitment there, so it makes the group assignment harder, and when that happens, it affects my mood and it affect my individual assignment* (Int 3:12). Nadine shared similar insights as she thought that online discussion is harder than the usual face-to-face discussion. She explained that online communication was filled with uncertainties such as the mismatch in study schedules and this also affect her enthusiasm in learning. She stated that "*I feel motivated when I have physical class, discuss the assignment with friends face to face, and it is kinda hard to discuss online. Because we don't know whether other people are busy or not, when we have a free time, they are busy, something like that, so it's kinda hard" (Int 7:12).* Dean resonated the same point as he highlighted the hardship of getting commitments from his teammates via online communication as evidenced in this excerpt "*Online communication is a bit hard; I have classes with the juniors, they like to do work last minute. Sometimes it is hard to tell them what to do*" (Int 8:9). These excerpts show that the participants were feeling stressful as they could no longer communicate with their friends like before. This finding is also discussed by Ismail et.al (2020) as their participants reported having difficulties in completing online group discussions and this has caused them to have reservations regarding online learning.

Another emerging theme is the **technological challenges** that in some way disrupted the learning process; and these findings corelates with other existing studies (Chung et.al, 2020; Sia & Adamu, 2020). The participants of the current studies seemed to have issues with gadgets and internet connectivity; consequently, these problems were affecting their motivation in learning. Andy mentioned that sometimes his computer stopped functioning during class, and it frus-

trated him not being able to participate in the class as he said that "*..my laptop hang, like freezing, ? ...it is so demotivating, sometimes the internet line , sometimes the computer*" (Int 2:13). He also highlighted that occasionally he had internet connectivity problems and that affected his lessons especially during online assessment. "*when you are answering the test online, it means you must have a good internet connection which is really important at that point, but sometimes we cannot control that the connection to be good at certain time. It took me a long time to prepare for the exam, like we have to know that the laptop is ready to perform well*" (Int 2:19). Eddie shared this notion as his learning process was impacted directly due to the poor internet connection. He saw this as an additional weight he had to face to make online learning work. He was struggling to complete his online assessment and did not complete the assessment that frustrated him . He explained that "*so, it was a really a burden for me because for the internet, I was struggling because the internet was very slow and I need to upload the document ... when I try to upload, it took like 15 minutes and when I move to the next question, I only had like 5 minutes remaining and I didn't finish my midterm, yes, it was midterm, so ya, precious mark was lost there (*Int 3:36).

The internet connectivity and technological issues also impacted the way they participate in the online lessons. Nadine mentioned that when she sometimes had issues in joining lessons with the video conferencing functions if the internet connection was not good. She said that "*Ms Teams required a good connection of internet, if not. Our video or our virtual camera will be blurry or the screen will appear the word on hold*" (7:2). Similarly, Hannah found herself stranded outside the class whenever her computer malfunctioned in the middle of the lessons" as she said that *" I have to switch the computer on earlier or else it will hang or it will get jammed and I will not get into the class on time, sometimes it happens in the middle of the class*" (5:9). Andy mentioned that he tried to reach out to a friend who did not attend classes for a couple of days just to find out it was due to the bad internet connection in her areas. He said that "*I noticed that, did she not join the class, then I tried to reach out to her and she said that she has internet problem for two days"* (5:53). In addition , Eddie and Dean too had problems in responding to the lecturer in live classes due to some technical issues. Eddie mentioned that he would remain quiet in class if he had slow internet connection that day. He said "*sometime I will be like very-very silent, that is when my internet connection, very slow"* (3:47). Dean sometime felt discouraged as often he faced technical issues with his microphone and speakers during online classes. He claimed that the lecturers did not hear his voice and this caused him to switch off his microphone throughout class and remained silent. He said that " *It is hard during live lessons, if I open my mic, the lecturer couldn't hear. I switched on my speaker, so sometimes I felt demotivated if the lecturer ask questions, I switched off my mic. What's the point*" (8:16).

Furthermore, it seems that online learning incurs additional cost to some students to ensure that they have good internet connectivity as well as gadgets to participate in online classes. Eddie mentioned that the video conferencing platforms used a lot of internet data especially during live classes and this affected his internet connection during these lessons. He said that " *… for the live class, it burns mobile data because I don't use wifi, so some times, my internet connection is okay, but sometimes, it become like very slow*" (3:31). Hannah claimed that her home was not equipped with home internet, and she had to pay extra RM60 to her mobile provider to get more data and this had caused a stretch on her budget. She said that "*I use my own data. we don't have home wifi. I had to upgrade my data plan. Before this I use prepaid but now I use postpaid because of lack of data. Sixty ringgit per month*" (Int 5:7). Nadine also paid extra for her internet although her family had already subscribed to a home wifi service. She said that "*It makes me hard to focus more. So I will study in my room but the connection of wifi to my room is kinda far so I have to buy data also to use in my room… so I didn't spend much*

like Hannah, like sixty ringgit, I spend like under fifteen ringgit for my data". In the case of Nasrin, she not only had to spend money on mobile data, she also had to purchase a new computer " *My biggest challenge is the internet connection. Before this I use my data also and my mobile phone because my laptop broken…at the first MCO, my dad installed wifi because I have been dealing with issues with my internet connection. And then, … last month, my dad bought this laptop*". The excerpts clearly show that the participants had to spend more on getting good internet connections and reliable gadgets to properly participate in the online classes. This finding is aligned with the findings by Adedoyin & Soykan (2020) that argued that online learning is dependent on technological devices and internet, consequently impacting the teaching and learning in general. Mahyoob (2020) highlighted similar point as he stated that almost half of his participants associated their e-leraning difficulties to technological factors such as internet speed, and connectivity problems.

In short, this section has explained the major findings of the study that consist of the participants initial expectations towards online learning and the challenges they faced in learning using the online platforms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, on the verge of the implementation of online learning due to the pandemic, the students gave favorable responses towards online learning. They assumed that the process would alleviate their learning experience especially in the times of pandemic, where they would be protected against the danger of COVID-19 and learn at the same time. Nevertheless, after learning using online tools for some time, the students started to feel the pinch of the online learning experience. First, the findings show that the students had issues with the absence of physical movement and space as in their usual classroom. A simple act of preparing for class was seen as an important step to be engaged in the learning process. This point was also mentioned by Ismail et . al (2020) they too reported the discomfort that the students faced due to the lack physical order in online learning.Second, the solitary process of online learning shows the importance of pedagogical alteration to suit the difficulties that the students are facing in online learning. The findings of the study shows that the students found that they were confined to their bedroom and computers without after-class interaction as in the conventional classroom. Finally, it seems that internet connectivity and access to technological gadgets impacted the learning of the participants quite immensely. The participants articulated that weak internet connection and sometimes gadget malfunctions affected the way they participated in lessons, in which some were disengaged from live lessons and some preferred to remain silent in the classroom. This is definitely not an isolated issue as this point is also highlighted by other studies Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Lee, 2020; Ismail et al., 2020; Mahyoob, 2020). In conclusion, the findings of this study highlighted significant issues in the domain of online learning due to COVID-19 pandemic. Such similarities discussed in the current study to other studies in this topic signify that these problems are real problems faced by our tertiary students and should not be taken lightly. We should coordinate practical solutions to help address the issues. One of the limitations of this research is the number of participants. Sample size in case studies is typically small, which is common in most qualitative research. On the other hand, the findings do provide solid groundings for further investigations to understand the real problems of online learning. Perhaps further investigation can be conducted into identifying a pedagogical approach that would suit online learning settings and caters to the challenges of online learning. or a quantitative study that investigates the challenges in a bigger scale probably at the national level.

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