

Analysing the Students Experiences of Online and Face to Face Classes During Covid - 19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the students' experiences of online and face-to-face classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study sample was based on seven students ($n = 7$) from Jhang, Pakistan, who were undergraduate students at private colleges. Purposive sampling was utilized to choose participants who had taken not less than one course online and one course in face to face setting during the pandemic. The study considered students from diverse academic disciplines to capture a wide range of experiences. The ages of participants were ranged from 20 to 24 years ($M = 21.86$, $SD = 1.35$). The researcher formulated a semi-structured interview guide in light of a comprehensive review of literature and consultation with the research supervisor. The procedure involved contacting potential participants through educational institutions in Jhang. One-on-one interviews were carried out and recorded in a comfortable environment. The duration of each interview was 15 to 20 minutes. The transcribed data was analyzed utilizing the technique of inductive thematic analysis. Results of data analysis uncovered themes connected with the students' experiences of taking classes online and face to face including the theme of convenience and flexibility, lack of interaction and engagement encompassed limited opportunities for discussion, difficulty in asking questions, lack of socialization, and decreased motivation and accountability. While educational adaptation as online learning is suggested during pandemics and the suspension of conventional mode of education as a choice to assure the safety of all and offer simple and opportune access to instructive material and sessions but such transformation won't turn as a standard in future. Limitations of this study includes It has primarily covered the opinions of Jhang students. Furthermore, the sample is limited. The respondents fit a specific profile, coming only from private institutions.

Key Words: e-learning; face-to-face learning, COVID-19 adaptations, blended/hybrid learning, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic upset the standard activity of all academic institutions around the world (Mustafa, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) has characterized the incidence as a pandemic (Mahase, 2020). A pandemic happens when an irresistible disease spreads quickly from one individual to another in various regions of the planet (Rusdiana et al., 2020). In Pakistan, the first instance of Coronavirus was affirmed by the health ministry of Pakistan on February 26, 2020 in Karachi. Lockdown limitations were upheld in all nations, forcing learning institutions to figure out how to look for substitute ways of proceeding with their educational projects without hurting the safety of their students and educators/teachers (Ahmed et al., 2020; Amin et al., 2020; Shehata et al., 2020). The Coronavirus pandemic phenomenally affected school systems around the world, requiring a quick change in educating and learning strategies (UNESCO, 2020). Almost 300 million students interrupted their school activities all over the world and undermined their future learning rights (Handoyo, 2020). The Higher Education Commission (HEC) gave orders to higher education institutes to get ready for distance learning (DL) modes and regularly offer internet based assistance to their students until the COVID19 emergency is settled (Ali, 2020). Since the 1990s, with the development of the Web, the idea of e-learning has arisen. Online learning, distant learning, e-learning and computer-assisted learning are all phrases that we know all about. These were the sole sources utilized in the keeping on educational activities during the pandemic. Students were educated and assessed utilizing information technology, which helped with shutting the learning gap created by the lockdown (Henderson et al., 2020).

International Association of Universities (2021) reported that over 1.5 billion students and youngsters have been affected by the closure of schools and universities all over the world. According to UNESCO (2020), countrywide school closures have had an impact on up to 60% of the world's student population. Having said that, transitioning successfully from a traditional class setting to remote and virtual learning could not happen overnight. At this time, the quick change was associated with a number of barriers and problems.

All through the world, educational institutes and educators were researching and moving toward a range of teaching softwares for students to help learning through internet (Nassoura, 2020). The sudden change from customary face to face learning to online education has had a large number of impacts on students. In digitally advanced countries, web based learning can be successful (Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020), but in Pakistan it is not much efficient. Inadequate accessibility of quick and reliable web service poses a challenge to the execution of online education, particularly among individuals residing in rural areas and marginalized populations in Pakistan (Wains & Mahmood, 2008). The presentation of information technology (IT) as e-learning has brought about diminishing education cost while helping learning and showing quality (Songkram, 2015). However, the disadvantages of this approach include challenges with internet availability and connectivity, weariness from prolonged computer screen exposure, difficulty doing lab experiments for scientific students, and a lack of face-to-face interaction with peers and professors (Ahmady et al., 2020). A

couple of research studies have found students' preferences for online and face to face learning in light of multiple factors. As per Paechter and Maier (2010) and Paechter et al. (2010), students favored learning online since it offered organized resources for learning and permitted them to study from home at their own pace and solace. They additionally favored face to face learning for specific reasons like working on actual capacities and shaping connections with others.

Bali and Liu (2018) examined the impacts of web based learning versus face to face learning, which has been debated in advanced education for certain years. This study took a gander of students' view online and face to face learning in terms of social presence, social interaction, and satisfaction at the Indonesia Open University, Taiwan branch (n = 107). A group of students involving in online learning was compared to the group of students who gained face to face education to assess their learning impressions. As per the findings of this review, face to face learning is seen to be better than web based learning with regards to social presence, social engagement, and satisfaction.

Dios and Navas (2021) examined two option instructive models produced by the COVID-19 epidemic: face to face and e-learning. The objective was to find out about university student's viewpoints regarding their learning experiences as well as what they have experienced all through this overall crisis and time of repression at home. The sample comprising of 100 students was investigated using qualitative questionnaire survey. The outcomes, which are separated into classifications for each instructive model, outline the students' view of present reality and their own way of learning. As indicated by 75% of students, the main element of the face to face learning model is immediate connection with the instructor, and this approach of the face to face classes was viable for 88% of them.

Most of Pakistan-based studies regarding obstacles and possibilities in adopting e-learning has been conducted in a typical situation and context (e.g., Ali & Ahmad, 2011; Bukhsh, 2007; Farid et al., 2015; Yousuf, 2007) where e-learning was an optional method that enhanced the educational and instructional cycle and digital technology was used by a small number of national educational institutions. The comparative analysis of online and face-to-face experiences, changes in student perspectives and experiences, the impact of the emergency shift to online learning, and the exploration of hybrid or blended learning models are some of the research gaps that can be explored further in relation to the experience of students in online and face-to-face classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. These lines of study would help us gain a better understanding of the various experiences and preferences of students in various learning contexts throughout the epidemic.

Rationale. The Covid-19 pandemic had necessitated a rapid shift in education from traditional face-to-face instruction to online and hybrid learning formats. Understanding the experiences of students in these different modes of instruction was crucial for informing educational practices and addressing the challenges that arise during such transitions. This qualitative study intended to investigate the experiences of students in online and face-to-face classes during the Covid-19 pandemic, providing valuable insights into the benefits, limitations, and potential implications of each mode.

By exploring the experiences of students, this study seeks

Aims

1. To explore the students' experience of online and face-to-face classes.
2. To determine the opportunity for discussion and feedback in online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. To analyze the benefits and limitations of face-to-face/in-person classes.
4. To explore the possibilities and potential of online mode of learning as an effective replacement of face-to-face learning.
5. To identify the preferred learning method among students and investigate the underlying reasons behind their preferences.

Research Method

Research Design

A qualitative study design was carried out in this research to explore the experiences of students of online and face-to-face classes during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to choose participants for this study. Sample was consisted of undergraduate students at private colleges in Jhang, Pakistan.

Sample

The sample consisted of seven students ($n = 7$) from Jhang with a diverse range of ages and academic disciplines. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 24 years ($M = 21.86$, $SD = 1.35$).

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of Sample (n=7)

Variables	Frequency	%
Age		
18-20	2	29%
21-23	4	57%
24-27	1	14%
Gender		
Male	4	57%
Female	3	43%
Education Level		

Intermediate	2	29%
Bachelor	5	71%

Inclusion / Exclusion Criteria

- The study included current students who had taken at least one course online and one course in a face-to-face setting during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Students from various academic disciplines were included to capture a wide range of experiences across different fields of study.
- Students of institutions other than private were excluded from the study.
- Students who only got WhatsApp instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic were excluded from the study.

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was designed based on a comprehensive review of existing literature and consultation with the research supervisor. The interview guide aimed to disclose the experiences of students in online and face-to-face classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Following questions were included in the guide

1. How was your experience with online classes during the Corona?
2. Did you get the same opportunity for discussion and feedback in both online and face-to-face classes?
3. How would you consider face to face/in-person classes now after the outbreak of COVID 19? What do you miss in them and what are the things that look valuable?
4. What do you think about online mode of learning as a replacement of conventional or face to face learning mode? How possible/impossible do you think it is?
5. In the light of your experience, why should online classes (fully/partially) continue or not?
6. Which learning method do you usually prefer? And why?
7. Describe the similarities and differences between your experiences with online and in-person classes?

Procedure

Participants were contacted through various educational institutions in Jhang. The researcher introduced himself and provided an overview of the research purpose and the importance of their contribution. Verbal consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews commenced. Participants were informed that their participation was willful, and they reserved the option to pull out from the study whenever they want. One-on-one

interviews were conducted with each participant in a quiet and comfortable room to minimize distractions. The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate capture of participants' responses. On average, the interviews lasted between 15 to 20 minutes. The researcher followed the semi-structured interview guide while encouraging participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide specific examples.

At the end of each interview, the researcher offered thanks to the members for their time and readiness to share their experiences. The transcribed data were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results

Qualitative analysis revealed interrelated but distinct themes. Core Themes and Sub-themes were identified during this process. Initially, common themes were gathered and further analyzed to identify recurring patterns. From these reduced themes, both superordinate and subordinate themes were derived. The superordinate themes served as a central theme that encompassed various subordinate aspects explored during the analysis.

Table. 2 *Experience with online classes during the Covid-19*

Themes	Sub Themes	Frequency
Convenience and flexibility	- No commuting required 3 - Access to recorded lectures 2 - Cost-saving 2 - Flexibility 2	
Technical issues and challenges	- Poor internet connection 3 - Time, Load Shedding & Technical Issues 4	
Lack of interaction and engagement	- Limited discussion & Questioning 3 - Less motivation and accountability 2	
Learning effectiveness and quality	- Lack of discipline & concentration 3 - Inadequate learning experience 2	
Health issues	Physical Problems 2	

The table, the analysis revealed key themes related to the experience of students in online and face-to-face classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, including convenience and flexibility,

technical challenges, lack of interaction and engagement, learning effectiveness and quality, and health issues. Various secondary themes arose under the Convenience and flexibility theme, including improved time management, no commuting needed, access to recorded lectures, cost-saving, reduced test anxiety, flexibility, self-discipline, and studying from home.

“Because my house is five to seven kilometers away from the college. Due to which I had difficulty in managing time.”

“Now time management has become very good. Second, because of the online classes, it saved a lot of money.” (Participant –1)

Participants raised worries about the lack of organisation, bad internet connection, and difficulties in enrolling in online classes, time constraints during examinations, and load shedding, all of which hampered their learning experiences. Participants cited a lack of discussion opportunities, difficulties asking questions, a lack of socialization, and decreased motivation and accountability as factors influencing their participation in online sessions. Participants' vision difficulties and headaches were identified as special concerns during their participation in online classes.

“One difficulty was interaction. I couldn't interact with professors and peers, which I think is important for motivation.” (Participant –3)

Table. 3 Opportunity for discussion and feedback in online classes

Themes	Sub Themes	Frequency
Interaction/Communication	• Lack of Discussion	5
	• Lack of interaction in online classes	4
	• Lack of feedback	5
	• Group Work lacks in online classes	2
Time Management	• Time constraints in online classes	4
	• Short attention span & shortage of time	2
	• Inability to Solve Queries	3
Technical difficulties	• Trouble with internet connection	2
Teacher Involvement	• Unresponsiveness & Delayed Results	3
	• Less motivation and accountability	3

The table presents a comprehensive overview of the opportunities for discussion and feedback in online classes, along with the corresponding themes, sub-themes. The findings reveal that there are constraints and obstacles in the context of online classrooms relating to engagement, communication, technological concerns, instructor involvement, and subject-specific challenges.

“In the 50-minute online class, there was never an opportunity for discussion and questions. My interaction with my classmates and teachers became quite weak and I often stopped asking questions related to lectures.” (Participant-2)

Time limits and the difficulty of covering all curriculums were major complaints, as were technological challenges and teachers' lack of response.

“But one problem was that there was a limit in the classes on (Zoom) app. It is 45 minutes, it cannot be more than that.” (Participant –1)

Table. 4 Benefits and lacks of Face to Face / In-Person Classes

Themes	Sub Themes	Frequency
Importance of social interaction	• Character Building & Growth	3
	• Confidence & Skills	3
	• Networking opportunities	2
Advantages of face-to-face classes	• Better learning environment	5
	• Immediate feedback and interaction with teachers	3
	• Opportunity to discuss more with teachers & peers	5
	• Access to resources like library, laboratory	4
	• Co-Curricular Activities like Sports, Debates	4
	• Motivation & Healthy Competition	2
Drawbacks of face-to-face classes	• Better understanding of important points	2
	• Time management	4
	• Cost associated with commuting and other expenses	2
	• Inability to repeat lectures	4

The table presents a comprehensive overview of the benefits and drawbacks associated with face-to-face/in-person classes. As the benefits of face-to-face classes participants emphasized the importance of character development, enhanced confidence, networking possibilities, personality development, social skill development, and improved mental state while studying with friends.

“I feel that fee -to -face classes give a better environment to learn because we can discuss more with our teachers.”

“We have the opportunity to work on our Social Skills and help with Social Networking for the future.” (Participant –5)

However, there were noted disadvantages of face-to-face sessions. Time management issues, expenditures related with travel and other fees, the inability to repeat lectures for improved

understanding, possible classroom politics, and views of unappealing teaching techniques were among them.

“If a class is missed for any reason, it is difficult to understand that lecture. And all the lectures cannot be repeated, so if the recording is made at the time of the live class, then this shortcoming can be removed.” (Participant –4)

Table. 5 Possibilities for online classes to replace face-to-face / in-person classes

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	Frequency
Limitations of online classes	• Limited internet facilities in backward areas	3
	• Power outages	4
	• Financial constraints	4
	• Challenges with technology & LMS	2
Technological and Infrastructure Challenges	• Poor internet infrastructure & Packages	3
	• Issues with the quality, reliability, and capacity of online learning platforms	11
Practical Learning and Resources	• Lack of Practicals, Libraries & other resources	3
Financial Constraints and Socioeconomic Factors	• Financial limitations	4
	• Affordability	2
Teacher Training and Support	• Training to teachers for online teaching methods	2
	• Lack of knowledge and skills among teachers in utilizing online platforms	2

The above table summarizes the potential for online classes to replace face-to-face/in-person classes. Online classes include disadvantages such as inadequate internet access in rural locations, power outages, budgetary limits, an energy crisis, a lack of experience with technology, and difficulty with Learning Management Systems. Inadequate internet infrastructure in villages and isolated places, costly internet packages, and concerns with the quality, dependability, and capacity of online learning platforms are all examples of technological and infrastructure obstacles.

“Online classes require a laptop or computer, internet connection, and software, but many students in Pakistan are not financially strong enough to afford all of these.” (Participant – 3)

Practical learning and resources are also impacted, since online classrooms may lack practicals and hands-on experiences, access to libraries and labs, and practical topic equipment.

“I understand that online classes cannot completely replace face-to-face classes. Online classes are a good source of education, especially in a casual

setting, but there are still some aspects of face-to-face classes that cannot be replicated online.”

“Along with this, our colleges, universities are not ready yet, technical problems are not handled like server crashes, software malfunctions and system shutdown during paper or class.” (Participant – 3)

Table. 6 Preferred Learning Method and Reasons

Theme	Sub Themes	Frequency
Advantages of Physical Classes	• Interaction with teachers and classmates	4
	• Study environment and access to resources	5
	• Socializing and networking opportunities	2
	• Explanation and Easy understanding of concepts	5
Advantages of Online Classes	• Communication Skills & Confidence	3
	• Convenience and cost-effectiveness	3
Disadvantages of Online Classes	• Lack of interaction and discussion	2
	• Health Issues	2
Preference for a Hybrid Model	• Combining benefits of online and physical classes	2
	• Practical subjects in physical classes	3
	• Busy schedules or remote living conditions favoring online classes	2

The table presents the preferred learning methods and the associated reasons for each choice. Students prefer physical classes because of the benefits they provide, which include interaction with teachers and classmates, a conducive study environment with access to resources, socializing and networking opportunities, improved mental and physical health, accountability and discipline, clear explanation and easy understanding of concepts, communication skills development, confidence building, elimination of additional costs, opportunities for participation, debates, and games.

“In face-to-face classes, students can ask questions, ask for explanations, and interact with their peers and professors. This is especially important in subjects that require the use of a laboratory.” (Participant – 3)

Online classes are famous on the grounds that they are advantageous and cost effective, permitting students to learn at their own feasibility and from any area with internet connectivity.

“Online classes are relatively inexpensive. It saves the cost of commuting to college daily. Both time and money can be saved.” (Participant – 4)

Some students choose a hybrid format that incorporates the merits of both online and in-person sessions. This decision is motivated by a desire to take advantage of the practical subjects and hands-on experiences available in physical classrooms while also meeting hectic schedules or remote living situations that favor online classes.

“A hybrid mode of online and physical classes may be preferred as it will make it easier for me to time my studies with my other responsibilities like household chores.” (Participant – 4)

Discussion

This study utilized a qualitative method of study to probe the experiences of students with online and face to face learning, as well as their liked method of learning (online, face to face, or hybrid) following the pandemic. The findings of the thematic analysis furnish valuable insights of knowledge into students' experiences with online classes during the Coronavirus pandemic, as well as their viewpoints on the capability of online classes to supplant face to face classes.

One of the data's most prominent themes was the ease and flexibility of online classes. Participants emphasized the benefits of successfully managing their time, avoiding commuting, accessing recorded lectures, and saving money. This shows that online classes are a handy option for students, particularly those with hectic schedules or other obligations. It is crucial to highlight, however, that some students encountered technical obstacles and challenges, such as a poor internet connection and trouble entering online sessions, which hindered their learning experience. Another recurring theme was the lack of interaction and involvement in online classes. Participants raised worries about a lack of discussion chances, difficulties in asking questions, and a lack of socialization. This suggests that the lack of face-to-face connection in online classes may reduce students' engagement and motivation. This is consistent with the findings of Wut and Xu's (2021) study, which found low levels of student-to-teacher and student-to-student contact in online contexts. Furthermore, students saw minimal input from teachers as a disadvantage, as they thought they had less guidance and assistance in their learning path. Participants also discussed the effectiveness and quality of online classes for learning. Some students reported difficulty concentrating and a lack of discipline, which could have hampered their learning achievements.

These findings imply that, while online programmes provide convenience, they may not always deliver the same effective learning experience as face-to-face classes. Participants expressed significant worry about health issues. Students experienced eye strain and headaches as a result of increased screen time in online classrooms. In addition to the limits

of online classrooms, data shed light on the advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face/in-person classes. The importance of social engagement in acquiring critical skills, increasing confidence, and fostering networking possibilities was emphasized by participants. They mentioned benefits such as quick feedback, improved interaction with teachers and peers, access to facilities such as libraries and laboratories, and participation in extracurricular activities. These findings imply that face-to-face seminars provide a more comprehensive learning environment that promotes deeper knowledge and overall progress. A number of studies (e.g., Iqbal et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2022; Paudel, 2021) identified perceived drawbacks such as technological problems and poor internet access, whereas Finlay et al. (2022) cited a lack of lab/practical sessions.

Face-to-face learning was chosen by comparatively large number of students over online and mixed learning techniques. This is consistent with the findings of a pre-COVID study by Keis et al. (2017), who found that face-to-face learning was more satisfying for their pupils. While online classrooms have demonstrated promise, numerous obstacles have been highlighted in their ability to replace face-to-face/in-person classes. Participants emphasized the limitations of internet access in rural places, financial constraints, a lack of technological knowledge, and the need for hands-on learning experiences. These obstacles impede widespread adoption of online classes, particularly in areas with limited access to technology and resources. Concerns were also expressed about the importance of face-to-face connection and classroom environments in cultivating creativity, critical thinking, and healthy competitiveness among students.

Finally, the results of this study give valuable insight of knowledge into students' perception and experience on online classes during the Coronavirus pandemic. The data stress both the advantages and limitations of online education, focusing the need for a balanced approach that considers the advantages of face to face connection as well as the convenience and accessibility of online classes. A blended learning strategy may provide a more comprehensive and successful learning experience for students in the future by tackling the obstacles and harnessing the benefits of both types of education. Similar finding was drawn by Singaporean (Lee et al., 2022) and Chinese (Li, 2022) advocating the combined method of learning.

Conclusions

This study was conducted to investigate the students' experiences of online and face-to-face classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study sample was based on seven students ($n = 7$) from Jhang, Pakistan, who were undergraduate students at private colleges. Purposive sampling was utilized to choose participants who had taken not less than one course online and one course in face to face setting during the pandemic. The study considered students from diverse academic disciplines to capture a wide range of experiences. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 24 years ($M = 21.86$, $SD = 1.35$). The researcher formulated a semi-structured interview guide in light of a comprehensive review of literature and consultation with the research supervisor. The data acquired through interviews were analyzed using

thematic analysis. Students preferred face-to-face and hybrid mode of classes over online classes as a viable educational adaptation during the epidemic. The study results elaborate that students admit the advantages of learning online but they were in favor of face to face and hybrid modes for greater learning efficacy. While educational adaptation as online learning is suggested during pandemics and the suspension of conventional mode of education as a choice to assure the safety of all and offer simple and opportune access to instructive material and sessions but such transformation won't turn as a standard in future.

Suggestions

Future research should focus on diversity of sample by including students from diverse locations and educational backgrounds. Increasing the sample size would provide a greater range of opinions and improve the findings' generalizability. To compare the experiences of students from different school years, a comparative analysis should be performed. Extending the study's geographical breadth would provide insights into regional variances. A mixed-methodologies strategy that combines qualitative and quantitative methods can provide a more complete understanding. Future studies can overcome constraints and add to a more far reaching image of students' experiences in online and face to face classrooms during the Covid-19 pandemic by including these suggestions.

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