

**No Campus Life for Us:
Personal Reflections of First-Year Students at a Malaysian University**

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to look into the online learning experiences of first-year communication and media students. The study was conducted by gathering 45 written reflection papers from first-year undergraduate students covering their opinions, challenges, and feelings about online learning. NVivo 12 was used to analyse the contents of these reflection papers. The findings of this reflective narrative study offer valuable insights into how first-year communication and media students perceive online learning classes in higher education, the challenges of working with new virtual classmates, the adjustment and role as student and daughters at home, as well as their mental health and emotional feelings towards online learning. Students learned vital lessons about time management, environmental awareness and independence as a result of these experiences. Students experienced anxiety and were demotivated as a result of the lack of face-to-face interaction and effective self-introduction with new peers. Most importantly, they were dissatisfied because they had lost out on the experiences of living on campus during their first year of study. Furthermore, this research looked into another component of the qualitative technique, which is a reflective method to study the first-year students' experiences with online learning in a Malaysian public university, an insight that can be useful for both lecturers and students.

Keywords: COVID-19, higher education, learning adjustment, online learning experience, qualitative research

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a pandemic. According to WHO, the term pandemic can be understood as the “global spread of a new disease”. The official declaration by WHO was a turning point for most governments around the world to shut down some of their industries including the education sectors. The COVID-19 crisis resulted in major disruption in the operation of schools and universities, particularly those affecting students’ learning and assessments. The decision was implemented as a preventive measure to combat the spread of the virus. In response to this pandemic, online learning has been the first alternative to embrace the new ways of learning. Many universities around the world positioned online learning or E-Learning as a form of distance learning or distance education based on the use of digital technologies to access educational materials via email, chat, audio and video conferencing; delivered over computer networks to enable or facilitate the learning process (Nguyen, 2015; Aparicio et al., 2016).

According to Rodrigues et al., (2015), the main goal of e-learning is to provide interactive learning and a supportive environment for students with personalized, learner-centred, open and enjoyable learning processes. With online learning, physical attendance at a university or school is no longer needed, but both educators and students must have a computer or technological device to maintain the learning process. Besides, the technological device, technological competencies among students and teachers and internet connection are among matters that needed to be emphasized when virtual classes were implemented (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020). In Malaysia, the closure of universities and the emergence of online learning during the pandemic created a new gap or digital divide between privileged and underprivileged students. Privileged students here refer to those who have stable and better access to an internet connection to pursue their online classes, while the underprivileged students may refer to those who experienced a lack of internet access in their area or technological devices due to the poor family economic status.

Literature Review

During the first phase of the movement control order (MCO) in Malaysia, there was a controversial issue about how online learning could be a great disruption to underprivileged students like Veveonah Mosibin. In June 2020, Veveonah Mosibin, an 18-year-old, public university student who lives in a remote part of the eastern state of Sabah shared her experience on Youtube, as she had to sit for her examination on a tree to ensure a strong connection (Tse Yin Lee, 2020). The aspirational story of Veveonah’s experience went viral and has been viewed hundreds of thousand times by netizens. This has reflected how internet connectivity is a problem for many students living in some rural areas in Malaysia. Unlike those in developed countries, the education system in Malaysia is still adapting to this method of learning (Bartley & Golek, 2004; El Said, 2021). During the early phase of the pandemic, most highly affected countries such as China, South Korea, Italy, and Iran have already adopted online learning platforms to ensure the continuous learning process (Tam & El-Azar, 2020). It involves many levels of education from pre-schools, primary schools, secondary schools to higher education institutions.

As a result of this turn in events, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to much research on online learning experiences which focus on the effectiveness and satisfaction of online learning, online assessments as well as students’ perceptions and the challenges of those that range from primary schools to higher education institutions (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020; Nguyen, 2015; Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2020). However, there is another interesting aspect of the online

learning experiences which will be explored in this study, the experiences of first-year undergraduate students.

Entering the university is one of the biggest life transitions for many school and college leavers. Traditionally, new students or “freshies” will have the induction or orientation week to familiarize themselves with the campus activities, library, courses and surroundings (Collins & Dodsworth, 2011). The orientation week serves as a welcome week which is usually conducted a week before the semester starts. The activities during the orientation week are crucial to assist new students in their transition or adjustment into campus life and which could lead to a positive impact on academic performance (Georgina et al., 2014). At the same time, students also have fun and get to know their course-mates who potentially will be their friends who help them to settle in as university students.

There are limited studies focusing on these students’ online learning experiences during COVID-19. The most recent work in this area centres around the Nursing Students’ Perceptions and Experiences while studying during the global pandemic. The study used qualitative inductive content analysis, and the data was collected using an online form. Findings from 33 reports of undergraduate students showed that as much as students are aware of their responsibility to the community, they are also satisfied with and supported the faculty decision on distance learning which includes the suspension of clinical activities (Lovrić et al., 2020).

In the same vein, a qualitative survey conducted by Hasan and Khan (2020) on online teaching-learning during COVID-19 pandemic has proven that students enjoy the flexibility of online learning. The study also suggested that multiple media presentations and different activities could improve the students’ interaction during online learning. However, like many studies, this study also agreed that the most common barriers or disadvantages of online learning are technical problems, poor internet connectivity, the lack of interaction and deficits in educators’ basic computer skills (El Said, 2021; Khalil et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2015; Zalat et al., 2021). Another crucial aspect of the experience pointed out by many scholars is the emotional state of students in an online learning environment such as stress, anger and embarrassment (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Faria et al., 2015; Zembylas, 2018; Brookfield, 2006; Lehman, 2006). Furthermore, a recent study found that multiple assignments and long online classes every day contributed to anxiety, insurmountable stress and health issues to the students (Sundarasan et al., 2020).

In the light of these findings, this research attempts to fill the gap by focusing on the perspective and personal reflection of first-year undergraduate students toward online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study aims to explore the first-year Communication and Media students into online learning experiences which cover their opinions, challenges and feelings during the pandemic situation. The outcome of this research has significant implications for teaching and learning strategies and emotional support for first-year students in higher education.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed narrative analysis as an approach to analyse the reflection papers of the first-year media and communication students. According to Riesman (2008), narrative analysis is used to understand how research participants construct stories and narratives from their personal experiences. This approach involved a dual-layer of

interpretation that consists of firstly, the interpretation of participants own stories and secondly, the researcher's interpretation of the structure of participants' narratives.

As elucidated by Loseke (2021), narratives can be derived from journals, letters, conversations, autobiographies as well as transcripts. In this study data collection, forty-five undergraduate students participated. First-year communication and media students were assigned to write an open-ended reflection paper using the Google Classroom platform. They were asked to construct their reflections to include their opinions, problems and feelings towards the online learning experience during the pandemic.

Before the students wrote their reflections, they were given three links to online news articles, one from an international newspaper and two from local newspapers. The headlines of the news were related to the online lessons' issues experienced by students during a pandemic. After reading the news articles, students must reflect on their own experiences by writing their reflections online and then submit the report on Google Classroom. The open-ended written questions style of analysis directly influenced the depth of research and determined the manifest approach.

Table 1

The News Headlines from Selected Newspapers

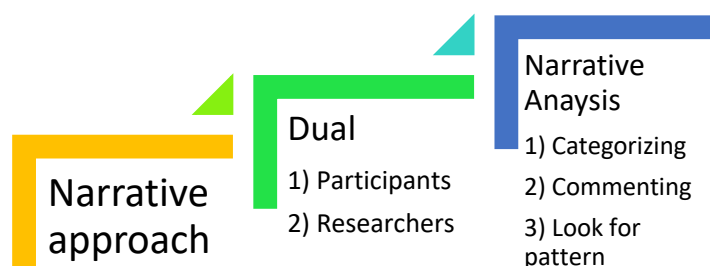
New Straits Time 25 November 2020	Embracing online teaching during the pandemic
The Guardian 3 April 2020	Forget freshies' week: universities prepare to teach new first-years online
The Star 16 December 2020	Online lessons are challenging, say students

Capturing the Narrative Data

As postulated by Sharp et al., (2018) narrative analysis displays the complexities of human experience and reveals comprehension of how people make sense of their lives in the contexts of social, cultural, and historical contexts. The narrative approach entails inquiry concerned with human experience narratives or inquiry that yields data in narrative form. It is also includes the compilation of narratives (stories) from persons or small groups (Butina, 2015). It can be applied to any forms such as documents or written texts, and observations. Furthermore, this form of analysis greatly adds to a better understanding of human perceptions and experiences.

Figure 1

Process of Narrative Analysis



Data was collected during mid-April, 2021 when all higher education institutions of Malaysia had switched to online mode of teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers found that this method allowed the participants to fully convey their internal narratives. Therefore, the inductive methods of narrative analysis were chosen to keep the individual narratives intact. The narratives were then split into smaller pieces and clustered by the theme with other participants statements and were coded by using NVivo 12 software.

Findings

There are three main themes in this narrative analysis. These main themes are 1) student's opinions about online learning classes, 2) the problems faced during online learning and 3) their feelings towards online learning. Under the first theme, besides online learning, another sub-theme that emerged, particularly the home surrounding opposite to the physical class.

Opinion on Online Learning Classes in Higher Education

The media and communication students in this study found that online learning provided several benefits to both the students and lecturers. Students enjoy the online classes because it makes them more efficient in managing their daily tasks and schedule. This new norm has shaped them to be independent and disciplined, allowing them to enjoy self-paced learning. Besides, without having physical attendance, online classes encouraged some students who have low self-esteem to become more confident during the presentation and express their opinion behind the camera.

In my opinion, I do like online learning due to many reasons and one form several is such a way of teaching a student to be independent and discipline. With no one around us physically, we tend to schedule our tasks more efficiently rather than having a friend by our side to keep on reminding us of tasks to be done. – Nurul

In my opinion, online class far better suits my situation even though at first, I was prepared for my things as I thought I am going to UITM. This is because online class allows me to be more confident during the presentation, asking questions and express my opinion rather than a physical class where I do not have self-assurance – Anis

Apart from the elaboration provided, students have other reasons as to why they enjoy online classes, namely because it is cost-efficient, saves time and is environmentally friendly. For Husna, as a student, online learning minimized her financial expenditure in many ways, such as printing costs and buying hardcopy books. At the same time, this paperless effort had a positive impact on the environment. For Khairul, besides the reason above, attending the online class also saves student's time. He did not have to spend more time to get prepared for classes, particularly in terms of travel time to the class. Instead, he could use the time to study before the class, simultaneously without the worry of being late.

Other than giving benefits to the students and lecturer, the Earth also gets benefits which we can save more trees! It is a really good thing for me as a student because I can save up more money. We now have e-books, submitting everything through online platforms and the good thing is I do not have to spend money to print out the assignment! – Husna

I like how I do not have to wake up early every morning just to get prepared to go to class. I think it did save me some time and I can use that time to brief the lecture before the class start. – Khairul

Problems Faced During Online Learning

a) Challenges of working with new virtual classmates. This theme focuses on the challenges experienced by students during online learning. From the analysis, three sub-themes emerged. Since this research focuses on the first-year degree students, it was found that many students stated that working with new classmates is a challenging experience. This situation faced was different from those who were in the second and third semesters, as the former have just entered university life virtually. They did not know each other, as they are from different demographic backgrounds. Thus, it is became difficult for them to work with each other as classmates, without having proper ice-breaking sessions like the conventional semester.

The biggest challenge among all is making new friends through online learning. I believe me and my classmates were strangers before and having the fact that we have to be working together is a little difficult due to the reason that we don't know each other. – Maria

We just entered the university but did not have a chance to get to know each other and suddenly during the first class, the lecturer just asks us to make a group for assignment. So, we had to randomly ask people to be in the group based on the first impression that we got seeing their faces during an online class. – Suhana

Besides, the students also stated that the lack of physical interaction forced them to feel uncomfortable with each other, particularly during a group discussion. The group discussion session can be difficult because they experienced awkwardness, since they were strangers with the others. Another reason is that some students fail to give full commitment as group members.

Another notable problem would be that it is very hard to be comfortable around classmates or even groupmates because we lack the experience of seeing each other face-to-face, the awkwardness is comparable to when talking to a stranger online. – Danial

The problem that I got from online classes is when we got groupmates that does not want to give cooperate in the group. Sometimes, when we want to do a group discussion we need to wait for that person, or even sometimes they cannot join the online classes so they might miss the lecture. – Azalia

b) Internet connection problem. The second problem faced by most students during online learning was internet connectivity. Previous studies have shown that many students faced internet connection problems during online classes. The participants in this study are also not exempted from this problem. Although this problem may be perceived as a common problem, it is important to see how it impacts student's emotions and motivation towards online learning.

Online classes can be draining and tiring as a student can't get the idea of what lecturers teach because of their internet disruption, environment or even the lecturers' connection. Due to this, some of them have to study by themselves, but does what they understand based on their studies is the same as what their lecturers taught them? - Adam

As someone who experienced and was affected by this implementation, I always had hard times with my Internet connection which at times could be annoying as I got kicked out all of a sudden from my online class on Google Meet because my Internet went down for a few minutes.- Farhan

*However, there are also times where the internet connection is not tolerating from the other side. The lecturer had to end the class early and postpone it to next week.
– Alia*

From these findings, it was evident that it was not only the students who experienced internet connection problems during the class, but the lecturers who teach the subject were similarly affected. Thus, the former had to be prepared to expect the consequences that they might face such as unexpected interruptions to the online class. Consequently, they had to be ready to study the subject independently, in case they missed the class or if the class had to be postponed. These situations created a challenge for the students' learning outcome since they did not have a smooth learning experience nor full input about the course from the lecturer. As a result, students experienced mental exhaustion and tiredness due to the internet disruption.

c) Role of gender. Another interesting sub-theme that emerged from this study is the role of gender. From the analysis, it was found that many female students related their struggles with online learning in terms of their role as a daughter or a sister at home. For instance, female students confessed that they had to juggle the role of a student and a daughter. These students have to compromise their daily routine and duty at home by helping their parents with house chores. At the same time, they were also expected to attend and invest their time in the online classes.

I also face a problem with my surroundings, carrying responsibility as a daughter and a sister. As time passed, I tried to adapt to the situation, which is hard for me to accept. – Husna

Online classes become more issue when you have to be a daughter and a student at the same time. We could not resist if our mom is calling us for help they need, right? This will make some of the students lose their focus and being left behind on their studies. – Amira

The other problem is the chores. I have a feeling that the girls might relate to this a lot, as our chores are doubled. This is because online learning is done at home, so we need to get the assignments given by the lectures done as well as the house chores. Some parents might be understanding, but some are not. – Eva

I have many responsibilities at home, such as cooking meals, cleaning up after them, doing housework, and so on. The environment at home is different from the class university. – Izzah

This study found that the female students needed to adapt themselves at home as a student and as a daughter. Having these roles at the same time could be challenging since they needed to balance their responsibilities when studying online from home. It is challenging for them to focus during class or even to do the assignments, since they have to help their parents with the house chores. For Izzah, this situation will be different if she is living on the campus and for some students like Eva, Husna and Amira, this situation is unavoidable, since not all parents

understand what the students feel, such as losing their focus and completing the task given by the lecturers on time.

Feelings Towards Online Learning

The final theme that emerged was the discovery of the students' feelings towards online learning. After several weeks of online learning, the findings seemed to suggest that students relayed negative feelings such as being demotivated and sad.

a) Demotivated. Many students in this study considered online learning as a new experience. Thus, this required them to adjust themselves since they had no experience in online learning. At the same time, they needed to adapt to the new routine, friends, lecturers and the environment. The pandemic affected their mental and physical health.

Online classes have affected me personally because, during this time, I found myself get easily distracted and less focused. It was because I had no energy and motivation to study. After all, this is new for me. I felt lost without a routine schedule – Farhan

No doubt, sometimes I feel stress and despair. Online learning makes me feel lost in learning, give up and so on probably because I couldn't communicate directly or face to face like before – Nurul

The online class gave students mixed feelings. Personally, feeling easily demotivated is the main feeling I have as this pandemic affects me mentally and physically. – Adam

The above findings indicate that students easily feel demotivated to study because they were not able to cope with the new ways of learning. They needed time to adapt to the new routine and the environment. Moreover, a lack of face-to-face communication with lecturers and classmates seemed to lead them to give up on online learning.

b) Sad. Besides feeling demotivated, these students also expressed their feelings of being unhappy as they were not able to attend the university physically. As first-year undergraduate students, they hoped to have a wonderful experience when entering university life.

I'm feeling a bit sad since I thought that I can finally feel like a university student after so long staying at home. It feels really different since usually we need to register our accommodation in college but we still at home and can't get to know our roommate and classmates. – Alia

This is quite sad for us because we as a student wants to enjoy our study life in the campus and have a face-to-face lecture. We also want to go and have fun with our fun because university life, is the only time we have when we are studying together because once we enter our work life, it will definitely be different. There is no campus life for us. – Anis

My feeling with this situation is not very happy because I cannot catch up more about what I learn. This is because most people need a friend for studies and when we were at home, we must study all alone. I just hope that next semester, I get to

attend class physically. I don't wanna waste my degree's years by sitting in my room and not knowing my classmates and lecturers properly. – Suhana

Essentially many of these students feel sad for a range of reasons. Firstly, being freshies, they failed to have the opportunity to experience the physical registration and induction on campus. Secondly, they feel sad as they are unable to get to know their classmates face-to-face, hence, they missed the diverse activities and learning experiences of being physically on campus.

Discussion

This paper presents the reflections of online learning experiences of the first-year Media and Communication students during the COVID-19 pandemic. What makes this paper interesting is that it represents the voices of the first batch of first-year undergraduate students whose university adjustments and learning experiences have been affected due to COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of this group of students has received less attention from many scholars. Based on the findings above, it has been discovered that many reasons shaped these students experiences towards online learning. While many western countries have been practising online learning for the past few decades, Malaysia still has a long way to go. Other countries reported to have invested substantially in e-learning include the United States, the United Kingdom, Côte d'Ivoire, South Korea, China, and India (Dos Santos, 2019). To ensure that the learning process is not disrupted, open and distance learning or e-learning is implemented as an immediate solution.

In working out the opinion of these students on this issue, the findings of this study show that although most of the students stated that they were a bit upset about not being able to enter the university physically for their first year of study; they still enjoyed the benefits of the online classes. For some students, online learning is cost-effective, saves time and is environmentally friendly. It is cost-effective because they do not have to spend money to print their assignments or reports which have been a custom for many years. Students only needed to submit their tasks online according to the deadline and an online platform such as Google classroom as instructed by the lecturers. By having online classes and going completely to a paperless environment, the students and the university contributed to the sustainable development goals (SDG) 12 which is 'to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.' This is important as it supports that online learning can be associated with environmentally-friendly and sustainability (Md Harizan, Hilmi, & Atan, 2016; 2017; 2019).

Besides, the students in this study also stated that the online learning environment has encouraged them to be more disciplined and to work independently when completing their tasks and assignments with minimal supervision from the lecturers or instructors. Due to their flexibility, independence, and adaptation to ever-changing demands; it is expected that these talents from online learning would prepare them for the labour market, to be more creative in writing, and help them achieve good academic achievements (Nielsen, 2012; Mohammed Omer Alamin, 2018; Al & Liu, 2020).

Despite experiencing the benefits of online learning, the students also emphasized how the physical surroundings could affect their online learning adjustments. Learning from home can be a blessing for students who have a comfortable and supportive environment. However, it can also be a calamity for those may be experiencing other disadvantages. Our findings show that some students suffered from these conditions such as noisy environments, house renovation and no designated space for studying, all of which left them less focused during the

class. Loh Sau Cheong, an expert in Educational Psychology pointed out that a conducive environment is perceived as important for students for learning as it affects students' academic performance. In contrast, it may lead to negative behaviour, low motivation to learn and a lack of interest in learning (Lee Chonghui, 2020).

The second main theme in this study explores the challenges faced by students during online learning. It is of interest to know what the challenges are that they face to be a university freshie during this COVID-19 pandemic. Under this theme, the specific focus was on their experience as a first-year undergraduate student. From the reflection papers, students were found to confess the challenges they faced when working with new virtual classmates. It is believed that this finding is crucial considering the situation as a freshie in higher education.

The ice-breakers session in a traditional on-campus setting is helpful as it involves face-to-face interaction, breaks down social barriers and creates a beneficial environment (McGrath et al., 2014). Unfortunately, this situation was not the experience of the students in this study. The challenges faced by these students in this research were different compared to students in many other studies. It is because they did not undergo common ice breakers during induction or freshie week. These students had to start their friendships online which left them feeling awkward and uneasy toward one another. This new approach left them feeling uncomfortable working together as a group. Besides, it seems that the limited experience from the university and lecturers in handling the session may also affect these students' online learning adjustments.

Just like other research, the main findings of this study also pointed out that the internet connection problem affected these students' online learning experiences (Teoh, Lin & Belaja, 2014; Almusharraf, 2020; Al & Liu, 2020). In this study, students confessed that internet disruption left them emotionally exhausted, and the situation became worse when the lecturer who taught the class was facing the same problem. Finally, another interesting theme that appeared in this study was gender which was a challenging factor in online learning. From the content analysis, several female students found that their role at home was a distraction to their online learning adjustment. At home, these female students have to commit themselves as daughters by doing the household chores as expected by their family. At the same time, they also hoped that their parents, particularly mothers, may understand the former's role as a student may require them to complete their assignments and tasks given by the lecturers.

In the final theme of this study, understanding the feelings or emotions of the students, seemed to emerge. The findings demonstrated that students felt demotivated and sad having to be involved in online learning. This was mainly related to their current status as first-year students. For them, entering university was one of the important events in their life transition. Thus, there were many expectations when discussing going to the university. Many of them felt sad because this pandemic deprived them of their university memories such as excitement and fun experiences when meeting new friends, registering for the course and being in new accommodation.

Another reason that they felt demotivated towards online learning was that they lose the fun part of getting to know their classmates. They also needed time to adjust to the different ways of learning, as opposed to their traditional way of learning. Moreover, as first-year students, they also needed full support, supervision and guidance from lecturers and senior students, which could be difficult to do with the online learning environment. Thus, sudden transition

and adoption of the online learning adjustment has impacted students' negative emotions and motivation (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021).

Conclusion

To summarize, this paper argued that online learning provides complex experiences to the communication and media first-year undergraduate students' adjustment. They reflected that online learning fashioned them with positive characteristics such as independence, self-disciplined and sustainable behaviours. For some introverted students, the online learning environment was like a blessing in disguise, as it enabled them to ask questions during class, hence, it boosted their confidence in presentation. Meanwhile, the drawback of online learning experiences obtained from these reflection papers study is that, not all students are privileged with a good internet connection and a proper study environment at home. Besides, the female students in this research also faced a dilemma to perform their duties, between being obliging daughters and diligent students when they study from home.

It is hoped that the negative feelings and challenges experienced by these students in this study will help the university and educators to improvise the effectiveness of online learning and virtual friendship-making. This is crucial in order that students could feel more comfortable and excited to get to know their new classmates. Proper planning by the university requires a focus on students' educational achievement, while remaining flexible according to the crisis and situations (Bynander & Nohrstedt, 2020; Carver, 2020; Lemoine & Richardson, 2020). In this case, it was crucial for their learning adjustments and educational achievements since these students will work in the group throughout their undergraduate years. Universities should take this issue seriously since it is predicted that after the pandemic, learning may be disrupted for another six months to five years (Dennis, 2020).

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