

Original Research Article

COVID-19 Pandemic: Malaysian Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Online Learning

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has introduced a new normal characterized by online learning. Students and instructors have been forced to familiarize with the online technologies and media that will foster learning. While many institutions and learners have embraced it, they have different perceptions of online learning depending on their experiences. The following research, therefore, seeks to research on Malaysian undergraduate students' perception of online learning. Participants were obtained from one of the Malaysian universities. Ten participants engaged in the research and data was collected using a semi-structured interview where the participants were asked questions related to the topic. On the type of media commonly used by the learners, all said that they preferred WhatsApp groups while 30% and 10% preferred zoom meeting and Moodle respectively. On whether the faculty had adequate resources, 70% of the participants agreed while the rest disagreed stating that they miss lessons as a result of insufficient resources. 80% of the learners also pointed out the intensity and quality of the internet as the main issue. Moreover, they were being given more assignments than course material because of the low innovation among undergraduate teachers. Half of the participants agreed that teachers had adequate resources to facilitate online learning.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Undergraduate Students, Online Learning, Technology, Education, Higher Learning.

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, also referred to as the Coronavirus disease, is a type of virus that has currently affected almost all countries worldwide. The countries involved have had to do everything possible to break the chain of contraction. Malaysia is one of the countries impacted by the virus, and to halt the chain of virus spread, the government enacted various mitigations, especially in areas where people socialize (Sundarasan *et al.*, 2020). The learning institutions were among those areas ordered for closure by the government as an emergency to mitigate this pandemic's spread.

With no other alternative remaining, the affected institutions have opted to adopt technologies to enhance their daily engagements' effectiveness. Online learning now became a norm, where the learning process occurs using the internet such that students and teachers do not necessarily meet face-to-face (Tesar, 2020). Online learning is usually done through electronic gadgets connected to the internet, like smartphones, computers, and tablets. However, for online education to

occur, supported software has to be used, including WhatsApp group, Zoom Meeting, Google Classroom, and others (Ahmad, 2020). Numerous researches regarding the use of learning software have been conducted. According to Kumar *et al.*, (2020), Google classroom is one of the best learning media software that makes learning more satisfying. It is less expensive and suitable for every user. Sabah (2020) also reported that Moodle is an online medium for learning heightens learners' knowledge motivation. Again, this media enhances theoretical comprehension when used appropriately. Andriyani & Sari (2020) purported that the use of Zoom meetings when learning offers suitable flexibility in the process as it heightens learners' motivations.

So, online learning has been an ongoing course in this period of the Coronavirus epidemic. But the usage calls for more advanced resources and more facilitating incentives like internet access and appropriate gadgets (Stoetzel & Shedrow, 2020). But what happens when undergraduate students do not have sufficient resources to enhance the efficacy of online learning? Based on the

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information offered by Tang (2020), about 45% of undergraduate students in Malaysia have the required resources for online learning. Such has led to the disruption of the learning process during this threatening period since the learning process depends on internet access and smartphones/computers for online learning. Therefore, the main object of the study is to determine Malaysian undergraduate students' perceptions of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research seeks to answer one important question, what are the Malaysian Undergraduate student's perceptions of online learning during the covid-19 pandemic?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Online education or e-learning is an interactive learning process or a virtual learning process whereby essential engagements include the separation of student and lecturers' physical appearance and applying different means of learning to facilitate effective communication (Almarashdeh, 2016). Institutions and the involved learners embrace the facet of online learning for enough reasons. The benefit of these institutions occurs when the learning process occurs without necessarily having to construct other rooms or adding physical resources, while the learners enjoy the use of learning at their comfort (Adams *et al.*, 2018).

In early 2020, the attack of Covid-19 was reported in Malaysia, and the government had to enact the highest level of governance by applying for a movement control order (MCO). As per the Act 1988, the charge is enhanced to prevent and control the infectious disease by ensuring the subjects are quarantined for at least 14 days. It is such a sudden report and panic situation that directly influenced the learning system. All learning institutions, including colleges, universities, primary and secondary schools, were ordered to close immediately. All the learning and teaching operations were held until the subsequent order by the government.

According to Aljawarneh (2020), before any decision to implement online learning, teachers must analyze the accessibility of necessary resources for the students. They are supposed to assess whether or not the students will independently complete a given task in the online learning activities without any assistance from friends or family members. Also, they have to understand learners' motivation to complete the study, even with interruptions at home (Azhari & Ming, 2015). The potential attributes suggested were significantly found to impact students' readiness level and their associated academic performance (Chopra *et al.*, 2019). This study's prediction is supported by prior research highlighting the impacts of online learning on undergraduate students. Calisir *et al.*, (2014) suggests that of all the adverse effects of online learning experienced by undergraduate learners, the speed and intensity of internet connection was the leading cause of frustrations when learning.

With online learning becoming paramount to most learning institutions, especially in such an epidemic, observing the readiness of online learning is critical to its successful application as a platform dependable for learning (Cidral *et al.*, 2018). Successful implementation of online learning can be achieved when educators understand the readiness of students' online learning context, like competency in using gadgets and internet access availability. A suitable assessment of internet and computer knowledge among students is needed for more comfortable and successful online learning implementation. Examining online learning process, individual-directed learning is a critical dimension and has been useful for decades now. A study by Zhu *et al.*, (2020) postulates that individual-directed learning improves the need for learning roles as an independent student, entertaining than a one-on-one mode of education, and grounded in the aspect of individual autonomy. By examining the literature on individual-directed learning, scholars stressed that learners who direct themselves are self-disciplined, confident, and independent in their studies (Schweder, 2020). Such an idea goes beyond the knowledge explored by most prominent researchers in the field of individual-directed learning (Song, 2020). Song (2020) insinuated that individual-directed learners manage, monitor, and motivate themselves to interact towards the complex model of adult learning.

According to Aikina & Bolsunovskaya (2020), motivation has been perceived as the learning process engine. In support of this notion, Kassymova *et al.*, (2020) mention that motivation is the fuel of human education. Engagement is cognitive learning, and activities that yield learning outcomes, time, commitment, and money are the essentials. Thus, some motivation aspects based on the three attributes have to be there for the significant learning process to occur. By joining online learning during this epidemic, undergraduate students have become feasible in receiving knowledge transfer (Azzi-Huck & Shmis, 2020). But what are the core elements motivating undergraduate students to be part of the online learning process? This research study aims to answer this question by examining the type of learning engagements, the causes of joining online learning, and the basis for learner's choices to join this kind of learning process.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Collection of data was done between April 1st and May 1st, 2021. The participants were briefed on the aim of the study and the consent received from the will participants. It was assured that any participation in this particular study was stringently voluntary and responses offered would be anonymous.

The method used was an online semi-structured interview with ten second-year students enrolled in an Advanced Grammar class in one of the public universities in Malaysia. Chen *et al.*, (2020) ascertains

that a study using semi-structured interviews seeks to collect data from critical respondents who have individual attitudes, experiences, preferences, beliefs, and perceptions related to the intended topic. In this case, this research study aimed to understand the impact of online learning for undergraduate students in one public university in Malaysia.

This research participants were second-year students who enrolled in an Advanced Grammar class in

one of the public universities in Malaysia. The total number of respondents was ten, consisting of 3 males (30%) and 7 females (70%) between the age of 19 to 21 years, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Demographics Based on ethnicity, 50% were Malay, 30% were Chinese, and 20% were Indian. Table 1 below showcases the respondents' demographics.

Table 1: Percentage of participants according to age, gender and ethnicity

Age, Race, and Gender	Number	Percentage
19-21 years	10	100%
Malay	5	50%
Chinese	3	30%
Indian	2	20%
Male	3	30%
Females	7	70%

The undergraduate students were from an English Grammar class in the second year of study. All of the respondents highlighted that there were in the virtual learning model and stayed with their family members when collecting data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Preferred Type of Media

Media plays a critical role in facilitating students and teachers in online learning, especially in this period. In this study, the respondents were asked about the kind of media they preferred while learning. Some of the choices offered to them were Google classroom, WhatsApp group, Telegram, Zoom meetings, and Moodle. Since respondents were allowed to opt for more than one option, 100% preferred WhatsApp groups over other alternatives. 3 (30%) participants preferred Zoom meetings, while 1 (10%) respondent choose Moodle. Given the popularity of WhatsApp group, undergraduate students' preference showed the type of social media that students have shifted to like no other communication mode is that effective. It is an inexpensive application, user-friendly, and simple to use in the learning process. Some chose zoom meeting as their preferred choice as it provides significant features in the process that can be a suitable alternative for online learning (Marlini, 2020). From this, it can be summed up that the WhatsApp group is the most preferred choice of communication and education during the Coronavirus pandemic since it is easy to use and friendly to the user.

2. Availability of Resources for the Online Learning Process

Online learning is a process that tends to be effective when all the resources are available. As such, the second questionnaire asked the participants if the school offered them resources to engage in the online learning process. 7 (70%) of the participants agreed (comprising of 40% strongly agree and 30% agree) with

the statement that the school offered them various resources for online learning. The rest strongly disagreed, posing that they tend to miss sessions due to lack of sufficient resources. Facilities provided by the school are in the form of internet service incentives. Students did not have to articulate the cost needed to be part of online learning (Ayu, 2020). This data showed how schools had given much attention to online learning now.

3. The Intensity and Quality of the Internet as one of the Main Problems in the Online Learning Process

The efficacy of online learning is highly dependent on the internet. In the questionnaire, the undergraduate students were offered a statement regarding the internet's intensity and quality. From their responses, about 80% (8) of the participants stated their concern on the internet's intensity and strength, thus agreeing with the statement. The rest were not sure whether that was their primary concern. This data indicates that internet access is the main obstacle impacting online learning for undergraduate students. This is similar to the research conducted by Mishra *et al.*, (2020), ascertaining that only 41% of students can manage an uninterrupted connection during online learning.

4. Students Received More Assignments Instead of the Course Material

In the next question, the research intended to understand whether the undergraduate students are given the assignments rather than completing the course material. From their response, 60% (6) agreed that they received more assignments than the course completion materials. This always happens due to the lack of knowledge regarding technology in that learning innovation is still not well considered. In this period of Covid-19, innovation in learning is critical to heighten the pedagogical process. When the educator offers a comfortable and satiable learning context, this boosts

learners' motivation (Ward, 2020). Diverse ways can be employed to improve the motivation of learners in online learning like devising engaging media, online discussions, and quizzes, amongst others. However, the learning innovation of undergraduate teachers is still low, so the more they provide assignments instead of completing the course material.

5. Availability of Resources for the Teachers to Effectively Undertake the Online Learning Resources

Same as students, teachers also need facilitating resources to stimulate them in the online learning process. In the fifth and last questionnaire, the respondents were offered a statement regarding their perception of how educators engage in online learning. It was the opinion of students about the teachers' resources. The responses showed that half of the participants disagreed with this account while the other half agreed. This might be the case since teachers might have smartphones and computers but no Internet connection, making the process less optimal (Radha *et al.*, 2020). Some teachers depend on the school's resources because such resources can be expensive to them. So, the learning process was more of providing students with assignments rather than spending time with them online, which calls for more resources. So, it can be concluded that teachers facilitating the online learning process of undergraduate students lacked enough resources for efficacy in learning.

CONCLUSION

This particular study, based on Malaysian undergraduate students, has various implications regarding the online learning process. This research can be significant for the governing bodies in Malaysia and the policy-making bodies in the learning institutions to design programs and policies that favor online learning (Shahzad *et al.*, 2020). That is, providing teachers with sufficient resources even when working from home and strengthening the bandwidth connection in the most affected areas. Besides, the top management in Malaysian universities should concentrate on providing improved quality education regardless of the learning mode (World Bank, 2020). The study further suggests that undergraduate students are more focused on learning through online mediums; hence, they need to offer them qualified educators. With the outbreak of Covid-19 at its peak, the normal habits have already changed globally, and more so in the education sector. In the future, most learning institutions will focus on online learning to better their pedagogical process. The event of Coronavirus pandemic attracts the long-term implication on institutions offering higher education. If the pandemic persists, this calls for adamant changes in the education sector from classroom to online learning (Alayoubi *et al.*, 2020). As a result, education costs will decrease, and education will be offered even across the borders. Therefore, the study recommends some suggestions to the institutions in question, particularly regarding server robustness, information quality, qualified personnel,

well-organized information, training materials and modules, and durability of online learning websites.

In general, online learning impacts on undergraduate students in Malaysia have been assessed in this study. The study involved ten students from a Grammar English class between the age of 19 and 21 years. The instrument used in collecting data was an online questionnaire consisting of five different statements demonstrating how Covid-19 has impacted online learning for undergraduate students in Malaysia. Further findings of the online process of learning have been depicted. First, most undergraduate students prefer WhatsApp groups during online learning sessions as it is cheap and user friendly. Subsequently, by facilitating students with the required learning resources, the school improves students' desire and motivation to learn. However, internet access, innovation in learning and teachers' resources are obstacles that need to be addressed if undergraduate students in Malaysia are to continue engaging in online learning. Future research could be undertaken with a homogenous group of learners. Moreover, it is imperative that future researcher use a larger sample size and engages more learning institutions in the study. The research also illustrates that more research needs to be carried on the area of improving communication and using multi-media to foster the online educational experiences of learners in relation to the course content and social connectedness.

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