STUDENT PERCEPTION OF ONLINE LEARNING IN COMPARISON TO ON-SITE LEARNING

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STUDENT PERCEPTION OF ONLINE LEARNING IN COMPARISON TO ONSITE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This Thematic paper will attempt to discuss the various experiences of higher level (Bachelors/Masters) with online learning platforms in order to ascertain the perception of students. the paper aims to investigate the perception of how students feel about online learning. Whether the experience was a positive or negative, the challenges of navigating learning in a virtual environment, how the change in social interaction amongst fellow students and colleagues as well as to the instructor, and the degree of engagement and communication difficulties that might arise as a consequence and the perspective and mindset towards online learning before and after COVID-19.

This paper provides insights into the overall experience with online learning amongst students, the factors which affect the online experience, the mindset of students before the experience and the individual attitudes and mindsets students have towards online learning. It concludes with recommendations and suggestions for instructors and the skills they should develop to improve the online experience.

KEY WORDS: Online learning / Experience / Perception / Bias / Instructors

37 pages

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In late 2019, the world has been struck by the COVID-19 Pandemic which affected millions, plunged the world economy into a deeper recession and changed normal life as we knew it for the better part of 2 years. Due to the pandemic, governments instituted lockdowns, restricting individuals to move freely as venturing outside of one's home was strictly discouraged and even punishable by law. This meant that peoples' mobility has been greatly restricted. As a consequence, many had to use the internet as the solution to continue their daily lives whether especially so for work and education. Most educational institutions turned towards online learning as a way to cope with the pandemic, resuming classes but in an online format. There were many forms of online learning before the pandemic, from distance learning, to pre-recorded lectures available online for students to watch and study and flexible self-study that required very little interaction. However, the most popular form of Online learning through the pandemic were live classes conducted through video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Webex and Google Meets.

This Thematic paper will attempt to discuss the various experiences of higher level (Bachelors/Masters) with online learning platforms in order to ascertain the perception of students. Ever since the Covid 19 pandemic, online learning has become the default mode of learning for most if not all students around the world on online platforms like Zoom or Webex. However, now that the situation is starting to recover and classes are coming back on site, I wish to investigate the perception of how students feel about online learning. Whether the experience was a positive or negative, the challenges of navigating learning in a virtual environment, how students with different sociocultural backgrounds might feel about the online format of learning, how the change in social interaction amongst fellow students and colleagues as well as to the instructor, and the degree of engagement and communication difficulties that might arise as a consequence, the perspective and mindset towards online learning before and after

COVID-19. Additionally, the advantages as well as the benefits that would have come with online learning along with the drawbacks.

1.1 Research Questions

The research question I want to answer in this paper consists of two parts.

Research Question 1: what is the overall experience and perceptions of online learning amongst students in higher level education in Thailand.

Research Question 2: what are the key factors that define and shape the experience of online learning?
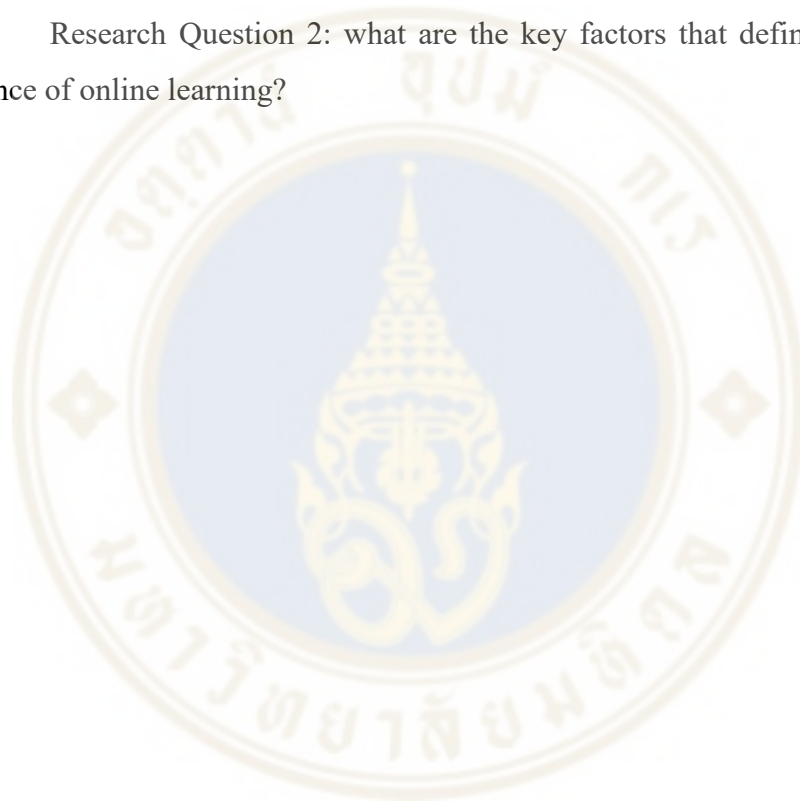
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Themes/Sections

- Students' perceptions of Online learning
- Case Studies of previously done studies
- Attitudes, Perspectives and tools of online learning
- Defining and background of Online Learning

The following literature review was conducted to examine the background, descriptions and any context in current research on online learning.

2.2 Definition of Online Learning

According to Singh, Thurman, (2019) Online learning current literature on identifying the elements, definitions and understanding of online learning has varied through 30 years from 1998-2018. Online learning can be defined in many distinct ways due to how it is used as an umbrella term to associate with learning through virtual communication rather than direct face-face, on-site classroom learning.

Through collection of terms and content analysis Singh, Thurman (2019) outlines the many differences of the terms online learning in each context such as the subtle differences defining terms such as E-learning, distance learning and online learning. E-learning refers to how learning is conducted using IT technology to help facilitate the process and is different from distance learning where learning can happen at any place without regards to the needs of face-face interaction. And online learning where a majority of classes and content is done through the use of the internet and is a type of distance learning which falls upon the category of Elearning.

For this paper, the main definition of online learning will be the form of online-learning using electronic video-conferencing software that allows instruction to

be conducted via the internet. Examples of such software are Zoom, Webex and Google Meets.

2.3 General perceptions of Online Learning amongst students

Almahasees et al (2021) and Chanpum (2022) make very similar comparisons about the general perception of online learning amongst students and faculties. Both researchers' findings concluded that while most students and faculties find online learning a very useful tool to cope as an alternative to face-face interaction during the COVID 19 pandemic there are still ingrained biases that online learning is not as "good" and preferable to traditional face-face classroom learning. The sources do not address the origins of the biases in detail but offer insight as to why this might be the case from the instructor's point of view. Almahasees et al (2021) discusses how there is an apparent lack of motivation in students which leads to little interaction in class which affects the atmosphere in the class which a majority of faculty have noted and found difficulty in addressing especially amongst lower education levels (primary level).

There was also a big disparity in those who preferred online learning as a mode of delivery as well. The biggest factors for the disparity lie in the age, gender, education stage and demographic factors. Social factors like age and education stage in particular played a big role especially in the mindset of individual students that impacted the entire online experience.

Almahasees et al (2021) in particular noted the difficulty and accessibility challenges faced by disabled students, specifically deaf students. However, the research also outlined the many benefits which over half of the participants outlined and enjoyed which were lower costs, flexibility and convenience being the biggest factor in the advantages.

2.4 In-Depth Case studies focused on specific demographics and factors that influence student perceptions

There have been many pieces of research into the factors which influence online learning. In-depth research that focuses in specific geographical areas has been conducted. Two sources that does this well is Ku et al (2003) and Trimble & Murty (2017) who conducted similar research with a particular focus on a distinct geographical area and demographic namely in the US and China.

Ku et al (2003) has conducted research on five Chinese students on their first online learning experience and investigated the cultural influences that affected online learning perceptions and attitudes and have resulted in very positive results. However, this study was focused more on achievements and results rather than the experience of learners. Additionally, the research concludes that culture does play a big role in shaping online experiences especially the sociocultural expectations present in Chinese culture specifically.

However, this study was done before the COVID 19 pandemic, and attitudes towards online learning were quite different than after the pandemic. Results in the case also varied with the results being that the degree to which online learning was received varied on individual traits and personalities of students and their overall attitudes and mindsets of students. For example, one of the students in the study, had less command of the English language as they lived in China and was an international student, and to their own admission "had a thick Chinese accent" was notably more quiet than other students. An explanation on their side, resulted that they did not wish to embarrass themselves which is quite common in Chinese culture of "saving face". Whereas another student, although of Chinese descent, was raised in the USA and was much more engaging. In this case, it is clear to see that culture does play a role somewhat in student experience.

Table 2.1 Table showing Likes and Dislikes of Students who participated in Online Learning

Likes	Dislikes
Convenience Could get everything done at home. Did not need to worry about arriving in class late, finding a parking space, or driving to school on cold snowy days.	*Interaction* The interactions among students and instructors were not sufficient. Lacked immediate feedback.
Flexibility Enjoyed not having a fixed meeting time. Did not feel stressed out or develop a fearful attitude toward this course. Could choose the right time to study when highly motivated. Read course materials at own speed. Could easily access the class Website.	*Instructional Design Concept* The difficult nature of the course. The difficulty of gauging if things were done correctly. The process of completing the project was labor intensive.
Self-Regulated Learning Liked to work on individual project. Liked learner-centered approach. Encouraged self-study and learning. When the actual project was done, it felt like a baby was born!	*Others* The evaluation structure was too rigid. Experienced technical problems while posting files online.
Others Liked to see different topics and ideas that other students posted on-line. Enjoyed feedback provided by instructors and other group members.	

Source: Ku, et al. (2003). A Case Study of Chinese Students' Attitudes toward Their First Online Learning Experience. *Educational Technology Research and Development, Table 2*.1

2.5 Learning styles, needs and expectations of Online students

Bhagat et al, (2016) conducted a study which involved 208 students in Taiwan University who were asked to share their perceptions on the most important factors that helped shape a positive online learning experience. Bhagat et al, (2016) developed a scale which consisted of four dimensions to help measure students' perceptions: These are social presence, trust, instructional design and Instructor Characteristics. The study was conducted on 208 Taiwan University students and the research concluded that there were many factors which affected students' experience. The methodology and framework Bhagat has used would be useful in this paper, as it could be used in forming interview questions based on the four elements of the scale.

Sung-Hee Jin (2016), helped create a visualization tool to help online learners become more motivated and less overwhelmed by the challenges of abstract concepts and exercises in courses that would adversely affect the online experience. In her study, Sung Hee Jin argued that online participation is vital in order to promote healthy online collaboration between students in order to promote active engagement.

She argues that motivation was a key factor in the enjoyment of the online experience and students can lose this if they cannot understand difficult abstract concepts.

Additionally, according to Sung-Hee Jin (2016), the responses collected from students noted how visualization activities helped illustrate and promote better understanding rather than just traditional lectures. Students in classes that required more abstract concepts did not enjoy the online experience as much as students in classes with clear visual aid. The results indicate that students who used the visual tool had a higher degree of satisfaction with the online experience than students without.

Sansone et al (2011) states that self-regulation and motivation are very important to the enjoyment of online classes, and found that students who had established routines and timetables felt like they got more from online learning than students without. Sansone et al (2011) highlighted the motivations of students with specific goals in mind excelled over those with experience-based learning. Individuals who had clear reasons as to why they were taking a specific course displayed higher levels of engagement and interest than those who were identified as not having specific reasons as to why they joined the course. Sansone et al (2011) identified the need and highlighted a high degree of constant self-discipline was needed in order to excel and enjoy the benefits of the flexible learning platform medium. In some cases, students noted that the experience was more mentally exhausting with comments regarding getting into the mindset to be able to fully engage was more taxing than face-face interaction.

2.6 Online Learning experience vs Face-Face

Kenzig (2015) and Vivolo (2016) discusses the many elements that are missing in an online class compared to an on-site classroom face-face setting. Three of the most prevalent findings were the distractions, self-discipline and personal relationships built in the class. The distractions refer to how students find it difficult to focus and fully engage with the content of lessons as they are likely to lose focus over the duration of the lesson which would be more difficult in comparison to a traditional classroom. The second element is the degree of self-discipline required. As discussed before in the section above, Kenzig (2015) remarks on how students found managing

time and schedules challenging as it would overlap with the time, they would save from commuting to school and that extra time saved could be added to personal time. Vivolo (2016) finally mentions how personal relationships are harder to form in online sessions as on-site classrooms students as well as instructors are physically required to interact with one another in a designated space, not having that lessens the incentive for socialization between all parties and would adversely affect the quality of the experience.

2.7 The drawbacks and resistance to online learning

In Sung-Hee Jin's (2017) as well as Sansone's et al (2017) papers, they mention the many resistances and negative attitudes towards online learning by students. Many of the complaints lodged were many technical errors of an online platform. Such errors would also lead to miscommunication or unclear instructions which impeded and negatively impacted the overall experience. Additionally, Kenzig (2015) remarked on how socially isolated a minority of students were, as the learning experience does not allow much time for students to interact with peers which was something online learning clearly lacked in comparison to face-face teaching which allowed for the natural interaction of students not only with peers but with instructors as well. Vivolo (2016) talks about there is a general trend of the perception throughout the world of the idea that Online learning is inferior in quality in comparison to traditional face-face systems of learning. Vivolo (2016) states that the reason for this is because online learning "revolves around the perceived notion that there is no personal relationship with students, which is normally reserved for onsite classes." And that the "quality of education is not as high" when compared to face-face on-site setting. He theorizes that traditional methods of learning: on-site face-face communication has been an established tradition and has become the norm. Due to this, any form of change or deviation to that norm will result in resistance to the change which is why there is a bias and resistance to change despite the abundance of proof that online learning can be just as effective as on-site learning.

As mentioned before, Almahasees et al (2021) discusses how both students and faculty in their designated school of research in Jordan, have an inherent bias

towards online learning. Particularly from the instructors' side, there is the view that it is more difficult to keep students from becoming "distracted" and engaged with the class, especially in primary education levels. This view and the perceived difficulty of getting students engaged and focused is harder due to the lack of physical presence in the setting that discourages students from getting distracted.

He also talks about how students as well as instructors feel as if they lose out on more of the personal relationships that would form in a traditional onsite platform that grows as a result and it is not so in an online platform.

2.8 Sociocultural context that influences student attitudes towards online learning

Vivolo (2016) discusses at length the many unfounded notions and negative attitudes towards online learning. He talks about how these stereotypical notions could have resulted from the human instinct to fight change and hints at how these notions can be more prevalent in certain societies and cultures.

CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Primary Data Collection Method

Based on the information garnered from the literature review, there are many different factors and dimensions to account for when answering the research question in this study. Much of the secondary data gathered in the literature review is based on studies using quantitative methods of data collection and the studies that do utilize qualitative methods do not focus solely on the student experience and perceptions of students in higher education level courses. Thus, this study will utilize a qualitative approach when it comes to data collection. Specifically Interviews with 10 participants.

Allowing actual experience and examples to be included in the data collection process as a result of utilizing a qualitative approach, would allow for more in-depth insights into the attitudes, motivations and experiences of interviewees which aligns with the research question this study aims to answer as outlined by McDaniel and Gates (2015).

3.2 Interview Method

Semi-structured interviews with open ended questions will be used as the main method of data collection. This is so that the answers collected will be much more detailed, interactive and taken from actual experience.

Sample Selection

For this research, the interviews will be done with 10 participants who are currently in the process of acquiring their first or second degree of study in higher education (Bachelors and Masters). Said participants will have familiarity with E-learning in some capacity. Whether it is from online learning, hybrid or even self-study.

These interviewees were selected with the intention to try and garner as much insight as possible and to try and answer the research question set forth. The

participants were selected to include many nationalities as possible to try and maximize the possible variety of responses and experiences. However, all participants have had in some capacity studied in Thailand in an on-site face-face setting. Furthermore, all have experience in online-learning involving video conferencing platforms like Zoom. 1 participant had stated that they have experience with self-study online program with prerecorded lectures available.

All students have had experience with Online classes and face-face settings. However, 3 students do not have experience with Hybrid class settings. Each of these students also specialize in different fields with only 2 participants sharing the same fields in the bachelor's levels. But in the Master's category all participants are all studying management.

Probing Techniques

Throughout the Interview, probing techniques will be used to encourage participants to elaborate on various points throughout the interview to obtain more information whenever possible. By using and asking about real-life examples, this will allow for two-way communication to improve data validity as well as getting deeper, more meaningful answers and insights.

Conducting The Interview

The Interviews will be conducted in a face-face setting which would allow the interviewer to observe non-verbal communication cues such as facial expressions and body language that could otherwise be lost in a different setting. However, due to constraints, two of these interviews must be conducted by video call via Zoom due to said participants living in another country and is unable to physically meet with the interviewer. The details of said interview will be displayed in the table below in the list of interviewees.

3.3 List of Interviewees

Table 3.1 List of Interviewees

Interviewee	Level of Study	Sex	Nationality	Online Experience	Field of Study
A	Bachelor's	M	International	Online, Face-Face	Social Sciences: International Relations
B	Bachelor's	M	International	Online, Hybrid, Face-Face	Social Sciences: International Relations
C	Bachelor's	F	International	Online, Hybrid, Face-Face	Digital Animation
D	Bachelor's	F	Thai	Online, Face-Face	Computer Science: Programming
E	Master's	F	Thai	Online, Hybrid, Face-Face,	Management
F	Master's	M	International	Online, Face-Face, Hybrid	Management
G	Master's	M	International	Online, Face-Face, Hybrid, Self-Study	Management, International Relations
H	Master's	F	International	Online, Face-Face, Hybrid	Management
I	Master's	F	Thai	Online, Face-Face, Hybrid	Management
J	Master's	M	Thai	Online, Face-Face, Hybrid	Management
K	Master's	F	Thai	Online, Face-Face, Hybrid	Management

3.4 Open Ended Questions

In order to allow participants to share more and open up as much as possible during the interview, Open-ended questions will be employed. The list of said questions are available down below.

Table 3.2 Open Ended Questions

Factors That Affect Student Perception of Online Learning	Interview Questions
Overall Experience with Online Learning: Positive and Negative	- What was your overall experience with Online Learning? Did you like/dislike it? - Which Aspects did you enjoy? - What do you think is the best aspect of online learning, is it about convenience rather than flexibility etc.? - Which Aspects did you not enjoy, and think can be improved? - Can you tell me 1 distinct memory of an online class you had that stuck with you? - If you had a choice for your classes to be online or offline or even both, which would you pick? Why? - Have you experienced many technical problems in classes? Are they a minor or major dealbreaker for you when it comes to Online Learning?

Table 3.2 Open Ended Questions (cont.)

Factors That Affect Student Perception of Online Learning	Interview Questions
Instructors' content and dynamics skills, presence and class	- Are teachers a big factor you take into account when taking online classes? Do you think it makes or breaks experiences for you? - Before classes went online, did you have a class you disliked on-site, but when it went online you enjoyed it more? (Can you tell me why/why not and how?) - Do you think Video Conferencing platforms like Zoom/Webex/Google Meets is an appropriate platform for learning? What could be done better? - How often have you had classes interrupted due to technical problems? Does this affect your view on Online Learning? - Do you think discussion-based classes where you had to interact with other people, is inferior in an online setting when compared to On-site? Why?
Individual Personalities/Attitudes of Students	- Do you believe that you are an introvert or extrovert? In your view, does this affect how much you enjoy online classes? - Do you like to work on things all at once, tackle a bit at a time or follow a schedule you came up with? Do you think this may be linked to your enjoyment of online learning?

Table 3.2 Open Ended Questions (cont.)

Factors That Affect Student Perception of Online Learning	Interview Questions
Individual Personalities/Attitudes of Students	- Would you say you are a person with discipline? (Get them to tell a story and time when they have, read facial cues and body language to see if lying) Do you think Discipline is essential when having online classes? Can you elaborate? - Do you think abstract classes or classes where you have to deal with abstract theoretical, intangible concepts (like philosophy) is better onsite, online, or neither? Why? - How about classes with technical content like the sciences? Do you think that classes are better done and content explained through Zoom? Why/Why not?
Inherent Biases or preconceptions of Online Learning Before and After Experience	- Before COVID, If I asked you that you had to do an online class, what would be your reaction? And now? Why? - How do you feel about the quality of Online learning when compared to face-face setting? How so? Can you describe why you feel that way? - How significant would you say class content and instructors' matter when it comes to Online classes? - Do you think you lose out on classes that are discussion heavy in online settings? Why do you think that? - How often do your parents grill you about the importance of education or a getting a job? - Do you think your attitude towards education is affected by your parents? Online or otherwise?

3.5 Research Framework

Student Perception of Online Learning

Overall Experience with Online Learning: Positive

Instructors' skills, presence and class content and dynamics

Individual Personalities/ Attitudes of Students

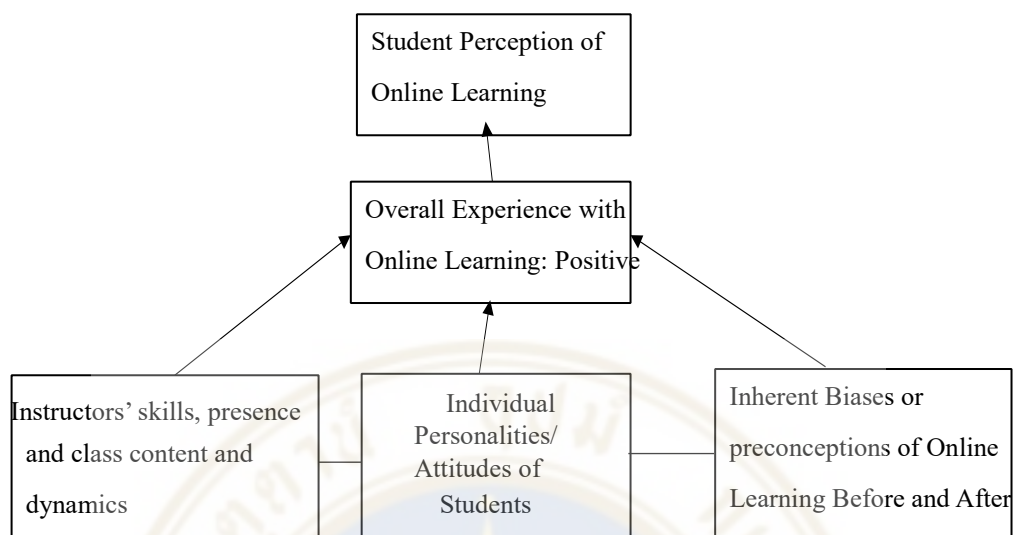Inherent Biases or preconceptions of Online Learning Before and After

Figure 3.1 Research Framework of the Study

CHAPTER IV
DATA ANALYSIS

After conducting research and gathering the data through semi-structured interviews with the interviewees, in a combination of zoom meetings and face-face sessions, the data can be summarized and sorted in four different categories as shown below.

4.1 Overall Experience with Online Learning: Positive and Negative

The responses I have gathered from the 11 participants were very interesting: the overall reaction to the online learning experience was very split, with 5 interviewees saying that their overall experience was mixed, whilst 4 interviewees said they liked the overall experience and 2 saying that they disliked it.

This was quite evident throughout the whole interview, as those who did like the experience had much to say about the experience and it showed in the atmosphere, tone and facial expressions.

On the one hand the 4 of the interviewees said that they had a positive overall experience with online learning. On the other hand, there were 2 interviewees who outright disliked the experience. Finally, there were 5 other interviewees who had mixed feelings about the whole ordeal.

The 2 participants who disliked Online learning as a whole were participants H and J. Participants C, D, G and K overall liked the entire online learning experience and would not mind a hybrid style learning program with a mixture of online and onsite classes. However, they did iterate that they would prefer classes on-site overall. Participants A, B, E, F, H and I had mixed feelings between positive and negative and could not say whether one form of learning was better than the other. They see the benefits of both but overall would have chosen to have classes conducted on-site if they had the choice.

4.1.1 Background of Participants

Participants C and D's background was in digital animation and programming which required more practical work than management courses or even in social sciences where theory and abstract concepts are more common. Both participants have said that they enjoyed the online experience because they both said during their respective interviews that they thought their lab time and practicals were not that dissimilar to when they had to do when they showed up to their university for classes.

Participants A, B and G have a background in the Social Sciences particularly in International Relations. The content of their classes is quite similar to that of management in the most part with the most major differences being the emphasis on individual work and more theories and abstract concepts to deal with than management courses. Most of the content between these 2 disciplines are quite similar with both sharing similar elements such as discussions, lectures, presentations and writing papers/reports. The rest of the participants have backgrounds rooted in management and base their experiences of online learning on that category. I believe that each student's subject of study requires more of a certain style of teaching than others. For example, a science student's class is more likely to involve practicals like experiments which require setting up specific equipment when compared to just mostly lectures and workshops like in management courses. So, when you examine how one would translate this in an online format, it is quite significant as I will discuss further in the paper.

All participants agree that the best aspect of online learning was the convenience whereas most agree that the flexibility was also an important factor that made online learning more attractive to them. 8 of the participants believe that the time taken for the usual commute to their respective universities for on-site learning took too much of their time before the shift to online learning and found that the time taken could be better utilized on other activities. 3 participants' commuting time took over an hour just to get to the university and participant B's response was very noteworthy. They said that they lived far from their university and it took them 3 hours to commute to and from the university every time they had to go to the university for lectures and also noted that before that, they had to wake at least 1 hour beforehand to get ready with morning rituals before departing.

3 participants noted the considerable amount of money they would save by not commuting but complained that the increase in energy bills were noticeable. However, they did mention that this is offset by the increased amount of sleep they would get since they are not wasting time commuting and made them more refreshed. 2 of the interviewees also said that in the long run it was cheaper since their cost of transport would be higher than the utility bill they would get anyway.

4.1.2 Negative Experiences

Every interviewee has had at one point had their classes interrupted due to technical problems like internet connection difficulties. The degree as to how bad it is depending on each interviewee. All interviewees have expressed frustration at this point and stressed that this is one of if not the biggest negative experience they have had in their time doing online learning.

All participants have also said that they have suffered at least more than once in some shape or form, technical errors that would disrupt the class. All participants save one, has complained and said that this was a big problem with online learning, one disruption could disrupt the flow of the class and 2 participants namely A and G had to take a rather abstract and theoretical subject and due to a technical error with the internet connection, they lost out on a portion of the lecturer's materials and found it difficult to keep up with the rest of that lecture as they missed out on a vital explanation. The one participant who said that disruption was not a problem was participant D who stated that it didn't matter to them as they had a lecture recording, they could "go back to and watch for future reference where the important parts were" anyway. 8 out of the 11 interviewees' negative experience that they distinctly remember were due to a technical error in some way shape or form. Interviewee J stated that there was one time where they "forgot to turn off the microphone in class and ended up with the entire class overhearing an argument they had with a family member". Interviewee K said that their internet went down in the middle of a final presentation which caused them many problems with their group and instructors and whilst the situation was sorted in the end, the error caused them much distress. Interviewee C said that there was one time when their instructor's computer broke down in the middle of an exam and that incident

caused many problems for students and the university as it had to be rescheduled and retaken 35 minutes in the middle of the exam.

Interviewee G said that one of the most noteworthy experiences they had was a negative one. It involved a problem with accessing the Zoom meeting and class assignments for the first 3 weeks of their course. Due to the instructor not checking their emails constantly, and no way of contacting them, interviewee G had missed almost 3 weeks' worth of lectures and assignments and almost had to drop the class.

Additionally, most participants did not have many "positive" recollections about their time in online learning with participant G noting that it's "a lot harder to find a memory I do remember fondly online than I do online, when you're with people physically it tends to stay on mind longer". Participant B had the most distinct positive memory as they mentioned that their instructor's cat would often climb on their workstation and mess about with the instructor which made for a good memory but often distracted the flow of the class.

All participants have said that if they had the choice, they would all choose for classes to be either completely offline if they were presented the chance to choose between either. However, Participants A, D and K all mentioned that they would prefer a mix of both with an emphasis on theory and lecture heavy classes reserved for online and discussion-based classes on site for more chances of socialization amongst peers and instructors and the ability to fully engage in social interactions which they believe would be limited in an online setting.

4.1.3 Overview of all experiences

To summarize this section, the most attractive aspect which made interviewees' learning experience positive was the convenience more so than flexibility of online learning as it saves time and money. The most negative aspect of the learning was by far the technical errors and difficulties followed closely by the lack of social interaction one would lose out on if one were to have classes online than offline.

Overall, 2 participants disliked the entire online learning experience, 5 had mixed feelings and 4 people liking the entire experience. With all of the participants stating that if they had a choice to choose whether their classes would be online or offline

or both, all participants have said that they prefer their classes to be entirely offline and on-site rather than online or even hybrid in the long run.

4.2 Class Content and Importance of Instructors in Online Learning

4.2.1 Importance of Instructors

There is an 5-6 split regarding the importance of instructors when taking online classes. With 6 agreeing that it is a big factor that makes and breaks the experience and 5 disagreeing and believes other factors like class content was more pivotal in the experience.

Interviewees B and F in particular notes that the class content matters more so than the instructors' skills and presence and justifies this by describing how their personal interests and proficiency towards certain topics motivates/demotivates them more or less regardless of the instructor. E.g., Interviewee B talked about how they disliked class X because they did not enjoy the topic despite preferring the instructor of the class than class Y's content which they are more comfortable with but with an instructor they did not like. Interviewees C, D and K all made similar comments; they said that they did not see much difference in an online class and a traditional one with interviewees C and D both stating that the class content is the same no matter what, and that it was the instructor's medium that affected their online experience. Both interviewees have mentioned in the interview that their instructor was more used to offline teaching and it was apparent as their lecturing materials and class layout would be better executed in an in-class setting than an online one. E.g., discussions were very awkward because noone would speak up in the breakout rooms unlike a face-face setting where the instructor's "presence would very likely encourage some talking". Interviewee A also made a noteworthy point as well. They said that in online classes, whenever someone wanted to talk or ask the instructor anything, they had to type it in the chat box which was rarely seen by the instructor and by that point the question did not have much weight the instructor would have moved on to another point. It was more difficult to ask questions and discuss personal things as oftentimes, instructors do not

pause and give a chance for students to interact with each other and taking discussions into consideration.

So, getting to know others was very difficult. Especially when on break, students can't meet and talk with one another as each person would turn off their cameras and microphones and go do something else off camera including the instructor. This makes it hard to connect with peers and instructors.

Overall, with the exception of interviewees C, D and K all participants have agreed that their experience with instructors were positive and does affect the class dynamic and how some classes are markedly different in an online setting than on a face-face setting.

4.2.2 Delivery of Content by Instructors

Notably, interviewees B, C, D, E, G and K all agree that instructors can be a huge factor that makes or breaks the online experience. Interviewee G specifically mentions that "It doesn't matter if the class content is good and interesting. It's all about execution. If a class has interesting content but the instructor messes up on the delivery then the class becomes boring". Participant C also has a similar sentiment saying something along the lines of "if the instructor is bad, you lose the motivation to pay attention and do something unproductive instead" In the words of interviewee K "having a good structure and content does not save you if it's not done properly".

4.2.3 Attitude and Emotional Intelligence of Instructors

The 5 other interviewees who don't believe instructors are a big factor talks about how when they register for classes, they would not know the instructor anyways and would not matter that much who was teaching it as the most important factor was the class content. 2 of the interviewees also mention that whilst class content is important, having an enthusiastic instructor also helps make the classes more interesting. Participant A says that "having an instructor who is enthusiastic and passionate about their subject can help motivate students" as it would reduce distractions and show students that instructors are trying despite the new experience for all parties.

Interviewees F, G and K also makes very significant points about instructors as well. Particularly interviewee F who stated that "some instructors are better than

others when doing online classes. The good ones can read the atmosphere of the class and address this whilst the ones that are not as good would not pick up on it. Or if they did, they just ignore it." Interviewee K makes a similar comment to this saying that they feel like the instructors are aware of it but don't know how to respond to this and force students to pay attention or turn the cameras on etc. Participant G says that they feel like some instructors don't want to ruin the atmosphere of the class by using their authority to force students to do things they don't want to do so. From what can be gathered here, it seems that a certain degree of emotional intelligence is needed in order to improve the dynamic and enjoyment of online learning. Participant G says that they feel like it is very likely that instructors are trying to get students engaged but it is very difficult to do so and would be very mentally exhausting to try as in an online environment, students do not feel the physical presence of instructors which make it much more difficult to get students to remain engaged.

4.2.4 Significance of an instructor's online presence

Another point that all of the interviewees happen to agree on is the importance of instructors and class content in online classes. Interviewee A and H both emphasize on this. Interviewee A has stressed several times over the interview that the emphasis on instructors is higher than that on-site. This is due to the high number of distractions that comes with allowing students to be on an online format. "Many students including myself have a hard time being disciplined and sticking out all the way through without paying complete attention". This creates more pressure on the instructor to be more engaging and keep the class interested and paying attention as it was easier for students to not pay attention. The interviewees also noted how not all students were motivated and disciplined and that class content can greatly affect student motivation. This is likely due to the fact that if the class or instructor is boring or not as effective as it could be, it is much easier for students to lose interest and indulge themselves in distractions that are extremely easy to do in an online format especially when it is hard to stay fully engaged.

4.2.5 Class Content

Surprisingly, none of the interviewees have responded that they had a class that that they enjoyed more online than what they originally had offline. Most of the interviewees talked about how it actually was more tedious and even downright frustrating it was to shift from offline to online. Participant C talked about how they had a mandatory physics class to take and that one time they had to get together on their own, equipment and materials for an experiment that the instructor wanted students to follow. This ended badly as not all students had the correct apparatus for the experiment to work. Many of the interviewees have discussed about how online learning was an acceptable substitute but that it was all that it was.

The interviewees also mostly agree that for technical and theory heavy classes, being online or offline does not matter. In theory heavy classes, interviewee F touched upon how whether online or offline the ability to convey knowledge should not matter as this depends more on the instructor than it does the medium. However, interviewees B, G and K all mention that in theory heavy classes, it is more convenient to do online classes as it would save time and money for commutes but it is more beneficial to be in actual classes as asking peers for their perspective could help make understanding concepts easier which is harder to do in an online setting. The rest of the interviewees believe that theory heavy classes is best conducted in an on-site format as any questions or concerns a person might have may be addressed immediately and that in an online setting, it is quite easy to be distracted and miss out on key points and either misunderstand or just miss the content altogether, which is less likely to happen in an on-site format as there is social pressure and fewer chances to be distracted.

By and large, all except 2 interviewees believe that abstract classes dealing with abstract, theoretical and intangible concepts is better conducted on-site in a face-face setting. Most of the interviewees said that when you are dealing with intangible concepts, sometimes it's best to try and visualize this. Interviewee G has had experience as they had taken some philosophy courses and pointed out that a good way to try and understand something you can't touch or feel is to draw it out. Many professors will try to illustrate this and their body language as well as impromptu drawing is best done on site. Additionally, Interviewee H has also mentioned that in situations like this, it is best to be able to discuss with people close to you to get their perspectives on the matter. The

2 other interviewees who disagreed that abstract classes are better on-site believed that classes in these formats should be done hybrid style instead. With the difficult concept being addressed in person and the applications and theory done online. No interviewee had opted for classes of this nature to be done online.

As for classes with technical and practical content like the sciences, all interviewees have expressed their opinions that they should be done in person. A couple of interviewees who had to take science classes that involved experiments has had constant troubles when it came to setting up experiments for practicals to prove a concept they learned in class. The environment and limitations of an online class for technical subjects like the sciences which would require lab experiments make it very unfeasible and a major problem which adversely affect the online experience.

4.2.6 Quality of Discussions in Online Classes

Again, all interviewees agree that another drawback of online classes is the discussion aspect of classes. Every single person interviewed has talked extensively on this subject and all mention 3 important takeaways. Firstly, interviewees mention how communication is more than just the verbal aspect and some interviewees even note that humans communicate more non-verbally through facial expressions, voice and body language than just verbal communication. Additionally, Interviewee A points out that in a classroom setting, they would notice subtle body language and use that to read the atmosphere and engage in small talk to get the discussion moving. However, they remark that it is more difficult to do so in an online setting due to the second point. Secondly, the issue of cameras as not all students have their cameras turned on and due to this, it makes it very difficult for discussions to start and to the same level of quality as an offline face-face setting. Traditional icebreaking techniques like jokes and small talk is very hard to do when you can't even gauge the reaction of the other party. Finally, there is the issue of staying silent. All of the interviewees mentioned at least once where the breakout rooms where discussions are supposed to take place are often silent as no one would speak up. They also talk about how in a traditional setting, the instructor would be there to help with discussions by providing talking points and stimulate activities. However, in most cases the interviewees discuss how reluctant people were to talk even with their cameras on.

4.3 Individual Personalities/Attitudes of Students

4.3.1 Personality Types

The results gathered from the interview was quite surprising, as I initially hypothesized that individual qualities like being an introvert or extrovert was going to be one of the biggest factors in shaping an individual's online experience. The responses I obtained contradicts this. Most of the interviewees pointed out that being an extrovert or introvert did not matter in the big picture and described it as irrelevant. They instead talked about how rather than a person's personality it was their ethics and attitude instead that affected their experience. All the interviewees mention that they like the convenience of online learning regardless of being an introvert or extrovert and that all still believed and preferred on-site face-face format of learning.

From what I could gather during the interview, the interviewees' reaction to work ethic is very different. The responses collected was very mixed with a collection of people who says that they prefer to work on tasks all at once and some who preferred to divide up the tasks into smaller increments and some who would make a schedule and work on it in at varying degrees. So ultimately, looking at the bigger picture, it is fair to say that there seems to be very little link between the online learning experience and individual traits and personality of students. From the responses gathered, students that say that they have a good work ethic like being disciplined and minimizes distraction also enjoy the online learning experience more.

4.3.2 Individual Work Ethics and Discipline

Most of the participants have elaborated the importance of discipline in online classes. 2 participants admitted that they did not have any discipline and would constantly be distracted but did stress the importance of said trait. Judging from the responses collected for this section, all of the participants have pointed out in some capacity the importance of being able to discipline oneself and staying focused in an online class.

Although interviewee I made a sarcastic but very valid point. "I think discipline is essential but having it all the time is like being in prison, yes you should respect the rule and pay attention but it's a little hard when the distractions are there and

it's like you're drinking alcohol in front of a recovering alcoholic" Interviewee I in particular also raises the point that in an online setting, there is no one to enforce the rule as the instructor would not have access to each student's screen and in order to pay attention, personal discipline is very important.

4.4 Inherent Biases or preconceptions of Online Learning Before and After Experience

4.4.1 Inherent Resistances and views of Online Learning

From what I could gather from the interviews, all of the interviewees had the initial impression that Online learning was somehow "inferior" to face-face learning. Prior to actually having to use it out of necessity due to COVID, there were 3 participants namely E, G and J who were outright hostile to the idea of online learning before being forced into an online format. Participant E claimed that it was not "fair" that if classes were online, the university fees and tuition would remain the same and took issue with the facilities fee in particular when students would not be using the actual classrooms when learning and was quite hostile to the idea before COVID. Interviewee G noted the concerns over the technical aspects of Online Learning and what kind of programs they would have had to install and pay for to use the format. As for Interviewee J, they were concerned about how they would meet up, talk to and make connections with others in an online format and expressed some frustration over said problem after being forced into doing online classes as well.

Only Participants D and K were quite receptive to the prospect of doing online classes. Participant D and K noted how their schedules were quite busy and how commuting took too long for their liking to the point where they would have welcomed the prospect of online classes if it meant not commuting. The rest of the interviewees expressed a degree of scepticism at the prospect of online learning before COVID, but were not hostile to the idea and mentioned in some form that it could be an interesting experience. After COVID, all participants have experienced online learning in either Live online class on platforms like Zoom, Google Meets and Webex etc. The reactions varied as mentioned in section 1 with the overall experience being a slight majority of

mixed experience of good and bad. Surprisingly, Interviewee G had a bit of a change of heart from initially having a hostile first impression towards online learning to mixed feeling of actually liking the experience unlike Interviewees E and J with the former having mixed feeling as well but is still unenthusiastic to return to the format and J disliking the experience altogether. Interviewee G stated that they did not like having to deal with other people for extended amounts of time since they were an introvert and that with online classes "once you're done with class, you can just go on your way and not have to bother dealing with small talk and other people's life stories".

4.4.2 Online Learning vs On-site Learning

All participants have stated at least once throughout the interview process that whilst online classes had its pros, it just was not comparable to the same level as face-face classes. The interviewees have said in their own words and interpretation that online learning cannot capture the same elements as the traditional on-site format has. They use the on-site format as a baseline for the ideal setting of learning. Interviewees B, C, E and K's responses was very noteworthy as they said that in an online format there was no one to enforce and police them to actually pay attention and listen to the instructor when they were lecturing with interviewee H saying that some of their classes were very awkward since nobody turned on their cameras and just didn't pay attention. Participant B noted in their interview that there was "no pressure to actually pay attention in classes" due to how in an on-site setting the presence of peers as well as the physical presence of the instructor made them feel as if they should pay attention otherwise, they would stand out and face consequences. Interviewee A summed up his experience of online learning and said that "it was like watching a livestream and the students were the people in the chat". Interviewee D, E, F and I goes into detail about how in offline on-site sessions provides the opportunity for students to interact, discuss, and socialize with peers and instructors and that sometimes. Interviewees G and J discussed briefly about how sometimes the content of the class and the quality of the instructor affected their views on online learning. They talked about how in some classes, the instructors did not know how to use certain online tools, like the whiteboard and struggled to help students visually. Interviewee J in particular talked about how they

noticed that some instructors did not even try to translate classes that were meant for offline on-site settings into an online format.

From what I can gather the reason why the interviewees feel this way is mostly due to habit. Although they did not say it outright, most of the interviewees exhibited signs throughout the interview that they were more used to the idea of on-site classes. When I would probe the interviewees to elaborate on the particular topic of why they feel that online learning is not as good as Offline on site, one of the participants would stay silent and make an uncomfortable face, 2 would just remain silent for half a minute and 4 said they just felt that way and could not explain why. Only participants F and B were able to provide some insight into this. Interviewee F said that they were not as engaged online as when they were on site. They said that due to peer pressure and societal expectations that they felt like they had to focus and concentrate which was why they preferred classes on site and for Interviewee B, they said that they were used to the idea of how on-site classes was the way learning took place. Based on this assumption, my theory is that when the pandemic forced a deviation to the accepted norms, it made people uncomfortable because it was a change to what was socially accepted as the traditional way of doing things (norm) and when people are forced to do things, they are unsure of, it makes them feel apprehensive, akin to committing taboo. This is why they try to go back to their safe space or comfort zone: (back to the way things were). My assumption is that due to how the current paradigm of learning is in a traditional on-site format, people would default to what they knew in an attempt to try and rationalize and base their experience to. That is why I believe there is the inherent idea amongst the interviewees that Online classes are seen as inferior to the traditional on-site format. All interviewees also agree that in an online format, students lose out on discussions and brainstorming activities. Interviewee J specifically pointed out that in an online setting, you can't really force other group members in breakout rooms to turn on their cameras and that "really negatively affects the dynamic, flow and spirit" of the discussion activities. Interviewee K who enjoyed the online learning experience also shared a similar experience and said that when it was time for their group to share their idea, the class was awkwardly silent for a couple of minutes. This is understandable since there is no physical presence, it is very difficult to initiate and maintain discussions in breakout rooms as there is no-one to incentivize talking as opposed to a classroom where

the instructor being present and seen at all times would encourage some talking. Interviewee H also mentioned how it was more difficult to read body language as well as facial expressions when having discussions as sometimes all they had to operate on was the volume, tone and speed of a person's voice which does not give a person enough context or information for discussions to develop at times. This is especially so when cameras are turned off as you could not see what the other person is trying to say and again dampers the results of discussions. Interviewee D has mentioned in their interview that in certain classes they had, the instructor would sometime randomly call out a person's name and ask them an impromptu question. The interviewee said this was one way to get students to be more talkative but more often than not it "terrified me because I'm already quite introverted and being called out like that made me feel like I'm in trouble" and "if I got the question wrong it made me look stupid". The interviewee went on to say that in an in-class format it was easier to talk because they knew that they had friends who sat together and would often help each other out and increase their opportunities to bond which was harder to do in an online format. Interviewee A, E and F discussed briefly about how they were also losing out on public speaking skills as well. As in an online format, there isn't an opportunity to practice going up to the class and speaking to audiences in presentations and instead had to present to a screen which wasn't the same. This is a very valid point as Interviewee E specifically mentioned that they were not good at public speaking and having the chance to do live presentations in front of the class would be very useful in boosting their confidence. Instead, they talked about how they just read off of a script on their screen and they said it wasn't the same.

CHAPTER V
RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

Overall, the consensus for the online learning experience is quite clear. From the results gathered and the analysis of said results, the participants of this paper has answered the research question of the student perception of online learning when compared to on-site face to face learning. The results were that the online experience was mostly positive with some negatives, but in the grand scheme of things, online learning can be an acceptable substitute for traditional on-site classroom setting should it become unavailable. None of the interviewees would have preferred an entirely online experience, only 2 would go for a hybrid form and the rest of the participants expressed slight discomfort or exasperation with an entirely online experience as to that of an offline, face-face setting. From the results I have also discovered another key aspect that affected student perception of online learning which is the content and structure of classes which played quite a significant role.

The 4 aspects of online learning I used for my research framework in terms of significance in descending order of importance is the class content and structure Instructors' skills, presence and Trust, Inherent Biases or preconceptions of Online Learning and Individual Personalities/Attitudes of Students.

From the data analysis, class content and structure were the 2 most significant factors in almost the same in terms of shaping undergraduate and postgraduate level students' perception of online learning and instructors' skills, presence and trust. Whereas inherent biases towards online learning was the second most significant factor with the least significant being individual personalities and attitudes.

The most surprising factor that affected student perception the least was how little an impact individual personalities/attitudes of students played. Perhaps this is due to the level of education and the maturity of students at this age, but in the most part the attitudes of students in higher education is very mature and reasonable. I had initially expected for responses to vary in this section but was surprised to see the similarity in responses as well as how some of the points made by the students made this section almost irrelevant.

The most significant reason why students would choose online learning would be its convenience as it not only saves up on costs but time as well. Flexibility closely follows in terms of the factor that contribute to a student's enjoyment of online learning. The biggest drawbacks to online learning would be the distractions it presents due to the lack of physical presence of instructors and social pressure that made students less likely to pay attention and lose out. Furthermore, there is the idea that whilst online learning is a good substitute for a traditional in class setting, it cannot replace and replicate the environment, atmosphere and experience of a traditional classroom. Given the choice between an offline class and online class, all participants would have chosen to take the offline, on-site option which is unanimous.
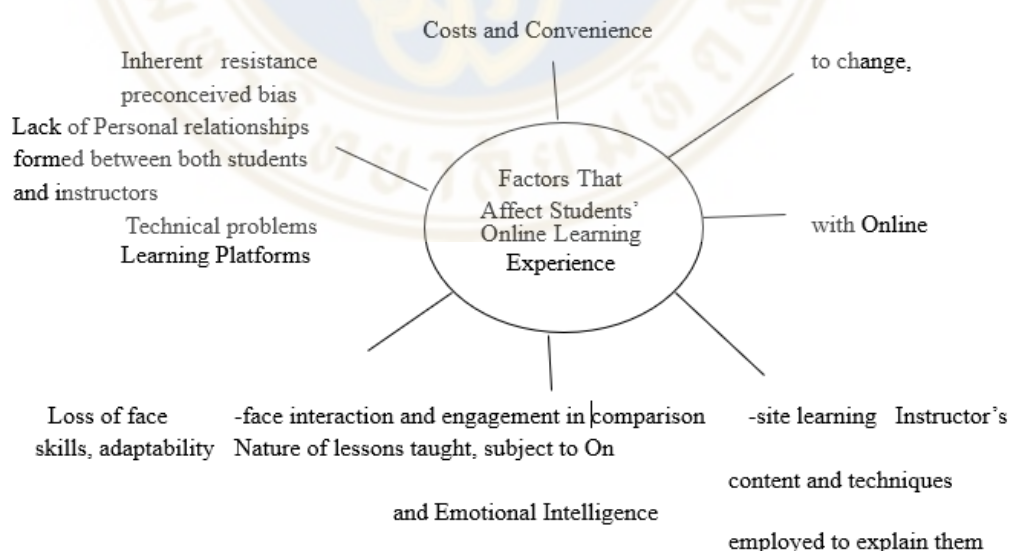

Figure 5.1 Summary Graphic of Factors that affect students online learning experience

5.2 Recommendations

This study would be very useful for education consultants, officials and teachers as well as instructors as it would help highlight and provide insights as to the factors that affect higher level education students' experience with online learning so that it can further be improved and streamlined. This could also be beneficial to management professors who wish to use online learning as a way to provide insights to how students behave and adjust their courses' content accordingly and even teaching style.

Instructors should be extra mindful on the dynamic and atmosphere of their classes when teaching online. They should be looking for signs of students being distracted such as long pauses of silence, cameras turned off and frequency of questions asked to see how engaged students are. A reliable way of getting students engaged is to establish clear rules and guidelines such as keeping cameras on and encourage engagement as much as possible. Instructors must also keep in mind that an online class can be very different to an offline, on-site structure. Not all of the materials and delivery methods will be a smooth transition when shifting to online. This fact should always be prevalent when it comes to lecture planning and evaluation.

Students should also be mindful of the same fact that lessons online can be different from a traditional on-site setting and mend their expectations to this. It is also much easier for students to become distracted in an online platform than an offline setting so it is imperative that they find a quiet, isolated location free of distractions to have their workstation in and stable internet connection. The online experience works best when both parties of student and instructor work together to try and accommodate each other by following these simple recommendations to maximize the quality of the experience without feeling the experience is inferior.

One of the most recurring and problems that all of the interviewees mention constantly and is universally agreed to be a major drawback and negative factor in Online learning is technical errors. The most common of these are the internet connection problems. There are some ways to remedy this. Firstly, having a good internet connection setup is important to this, and universities can also help provide specific hardware specifications in order to have the optimum experience would be.

Although it is noted that that students are expected to have a stable internet connection, not all students could afford it and thus the best institutions can do is provide some minimum hardware specifications for students to follow along. Furthermore, class content should also be made much more transparent as well. When students signed up for different online courses, they have different expectations on what each class have on offer. The only indication they would get is the name of the class. This is not veery helpful for online classes, as students would not be able to contact instructors directly. Instead, I would recommend on making the syllabus of classes available to students as they register to show clearly what is done on each week, the content covered and the delivery of the content (be it in forms of lectures, discussions, practicals etc).

5.3 Limitations of the study and opportunities for future research

There is further research that could be made for this study. The Study was done on bachelor's and Master's level students with most of the participants having a management background, this can be expanded to other disciplines and focused on students in other levels of education. This paper could also have used a different method of data collection, using quantitative methods or even mixed methods. For even greater data and responses. Most importantly if given more time and resources I could have interviewed more people to get an even bigger and more varied response as well as students from other disciplines as well.

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