



Reasons for Undergraduates' Attitudes toward Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

While online learning was implemented voluntarily in some countries, the pandemic forced many countries to embrace online learning as the only strategy for continuing the education of university students. Even though Sri Lanka was returning to some normalcy, the current economic catastrophe in Sri Lanka still forces online learning. Although the previous studies focused on many aspects of online learning, students' attitudes toward online learning and the reasons behind those attitudes received rare attention. In this background, our paper explores the reasons for university students' attitudes toward online learning based on nearly two and a half years of experience. Under the qualitative methodology, 20 semi-structured interviews were held with private and state university students. Our data analyses revealed that while no students have extremely positive or negative attitudes, many believe in online learning during crises. Also, in general, our participants' attitudes toward online learning were mixed since they felt positive and negative about it depending on psychological factors, teaching methods, online learning environment, administration, colleagues, and crisis-driven reasons.

Keywords: crises, COVID-19 pandemic, online learning, online learning attitudes

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INTRODUCTION

Online learning, which was practiced voluntarily before the COVID-19 pandemic, became a panacea in facing the unprecedented global pandemic despite the challenges posed to both educators and learners (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Consequently, attention to online learning research was reawakening, and researchers began exploring many aspects of online learning as the nature of implementing online learning after the pandemic was drastically different from the pre-COVID era.

Many Sri Lankan higher education institutions closed down in March 2020 to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In this situation, the only solution was online learning in continuing higher education for the young undergraduates who have been impatiently waiting to complete their degree and enter the job market. However, implementation of online learning was not that easy as the practice of online learning is extremely novel for most Sri Lankan higher education institutions. It was a considerable change initiative for many institutions while grappling with many ways of initiating and continuing. Although the risk of the pandemic reduced slowly in the initial months of the year 2022, Sri Lankan higher education institutions could not shift to fully onsite learning due to the severe economic and political crises that came in a row. The two unexpected crises created the largest disruption of the domestic education system by locking the learners to their residencies for around two and half years.

According to our experiences as well as informal chats with online learning participants (both students and lecturers), various thinking and feeling patterns toward online learning eventually resulted in favorable or unfavorable online learning behaviors. When a person thinks, feels, and behaves in a certain way towards something, those sentiments are known to be attitudes that significantly impact behaviors (Luthans, 2015). Accordingly, students' online learning attitudes should have an enormous impact on their online learning effectiveness and engagement. As Valantinaite et al. (2020) stated, students' attitudes are more important than computer literacy in making online learning a success. However, so far, undergraduates' attitudes toward online learning have received less attention from the scientific community. As stated by Yazgan (2022), investigating students' attitudes toward online learning during the pandemic will be decisive in evaluating its success and making the best version of it in the future. Against this backdrop,

our study aims to explore the reasons for online learning attitudes in a unique South Asian context, which has been unique and practiced online learning experienced nearly for two and half years.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As many countries moved to online learning with the spread of the virus, online learning became popular and received scholarly attention which was limited before the pandemic (e.g., Abdulla, 2012; Cole et. al, 2014). Studies into online learning at the initial phases of the pandemic explored the aspects such as readiness towards online learning, development opportunities, and threats of online learning (Vlachopoulos, 2020; La Velle et.al., 2020) teaching methods and measures (Moorhouse, 2020; Osman, 2020), adoption of online learning (Almaiah et. al., 2020; Alqahtani & Rajkhan, 2020; Shahzad et. al, 2020). Later, researchers assessed the experience, effectiveness, impact, and satisfaction of online learning drawing perspectives from both teacher's and students' perspectives (Sujarwo et.al, 2020; Herguner, 2020; Kusel et.al, 2020; Zhu et.al, 2020; Wang et.al, 2021).

Undoubtedly both teachers and students must have positive thinking and feelings to make online learning a success. Thus, exploring online learning attitudes was drawn the attention of scholars. For instance, Chu et al. (2021) found that although peer interactions and course design have a salient impact on students' attitudes, interactions with instructors do not affect students' attitudes toward online learning. Shawaqfeh et al. (2021) also found that students demonstrated a positive attitude towards online learning despite the barriers they experienced. On one hand, many perceived benefits of online learning time-efficiencies, safety, and convenience (Hussein et.al, 2020) might create positive feelings about online learning. On the other hand, the perceived disadvantages of online learning such as distractions, reduced focus, heavy workload, problems with technology and the internet, and insufficient support from instructors and colleagues (Hussein et.al, 2020) might result in forming negative attitudes toward online learning. Moreover, online support service quality, online learning acceptance, student satisfaction (Lee, 2010), online teaching experience, lecturer's competence, lecturer's attitude towards learning, nature of the subject (Hung & Jeng, 2012), service quality, information quality, self-efficacy, satisfaction (Alzahrani et al., 2021), effort expectation, performance expectation, social influence and facilitating conditions in using the online education (Yunus et al., 2021) were

found out to be reasons to enhance or reduce the attitudes towards online learning among students in different contexts. Yet the majority of the studies employed quantitative methodologies to derive their findings related to online learning attitudes (Hussein et.al, 2020; Valantinaite et.al 2020; Ferrer et.al, 2020) and lack much-needed details and nuances.

Further, the existing literature evidence on online learning was largely related to the western context. There were very limited studies accessible, which are conducted in the Sri Lankan context specifically during the pandemic (Randewa et.al, 2021; Nafrees et.al, 2020; Akuratiya & Meddage, 2020; Chandrasiri, & Weerakoon, 2022) but those have not to dig down to understand the online learning sentiments. Although traditional classrooms appeared to be indispensable, the positive attitudes and willingness of the majority of students to engage in distance learning classes in the post-COVID-19 pandemic indicate an immense potential future for e-learning platforms in higher education institutes (Ismaili, 2021). However, studies that gathered data from university students who experienced online learning during a multiple crises, representing multiple disciplines and based on subjective viewpoints are very rare. Thus, the present study voids the gaps by exploring the reasons for online learning attitudes of students who have undergone more than two years of online learning during many crises.

METHODOLOGY

Following a qualitative research methodology and exploratory research approach, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 20 students from different universities in Sri Lanka representing diverse disciplinary backgrounds (See Table 1 for background information on the participants of the study). We interviewed 15 students from September – December 2021 to identify how they think and feel about online learning and the reasons behind those feelings. We once again contacted them in April-August 2022 to get their perspectives on the latter part of the health pandemic and economic crises. In addition, we contacted another 05 students in April-August 2022 to get their views on the same questions that were under exploration. We purposefully selected students representing (See Table 1 for background details of the participants) diverse disciplines and backgrounds to capture the wide variety of reasons behind online learning attitudes. All the interviews were conducted over Zoom or telephone due to the need to ensure physical distancing. The length of the interviews ranged from one hour to

three hours. The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent and later transcribed verbatim.

After transcribing the interviews, we conducted the initial analysis separately, through a sentence-by-sentence, inductive coding process. During this process, we were particularly mindful of identifying why students form positive and negative thinking, feeling, and behavioral tendencies toward online learning.

Table 1: Background Details of the Participants

Ref. No.	Gender & Age	University & Degree	Year	Device/s & signal strength
P1	Female, 22Y	State - Food science	Year 2	Smart Phone, Laptop, Average
P2	Female, 22Y	State - Business Management	Year 2	Smart Phone, Laptop, Good
P3	Female, 21Y	Private - Survey sciences	Year 2	Smart Phone, Laptop, Average
P4	Male, 25Y	State - Food Science	Year 2	Smart Phone, Laptop, iPad Excellent
P5	Female, 23Y	State - Social Sciences	Year 1	Laptop Average
P6	Female, 27Y	State - Live-stock production	Year 4	Phone, Laptop, Good
P7	Male, 23Y	State - Business Management	Year 3	Smart Phone Mobile-Average
P8	Female, 21Y	Private - Tourism Management	Year 2	Smart Phone, Laptop, Average
P9	Male, 22Y	State – Dancing & Drama	Year 1	Smart Phone Dialogue data Average
P10	Female 21	State - Valuation	Year 1	Laptop Good
P11	Female 25	State - English Language	Year 4	Smart Phone & Laptop, Very week
P12	Male 23	State - Business Administration	Year 2	Smart Phone Weak
P13	Male 23	Private - Business Admin; Supply Chain & Logistics	Year 4	Smart Phone, Laptop Good
P14	Male22	State – Business Management	Year2	Smart Phone, Laptop Excellent
P15	Male 23	State - Civil Engineering	Year 3	Smart phone, Laptop Good

P16	Female 24	State - Social Sciences & Languages	Year 4	Smart phone, Laptop Good
P17	Male 21	State - Management	Year 1	Smart phone, Laptop Good
P18	Female 23	State - Management	Year 3	Smart phone, Laptop Good
P19	Male 24	State - Agri Business Management	Year 3	Smart phone, Laptop Excellent
P20	Female 22	State - Marketing Management	Year 2	Smart phone, Laptop Average

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Our data analysis revealed that the participants did not have extremely positive or negative thinking and feeling patterns on online learning. Rather, most of the participants had mixed feelings as they passed through nearly a two and half years online learning journey. Although there some participants had relatively positive attitudes (e.g., P5, P8, P19) and some had relatively negative attitudes toward online learning (e.g., P1, P10), they were also having opposite thinking and feeling patterns depending on various reasons.

Our data analysis resulted in various reasons for those positive and negative attitudes toward online learning as described below (Table 2 summarizes the reasons for positive attitudes and Table 3 summarizes the reasons for negative attitudes).

Reasons for Positive Online Learning Attitudes

Personality traits of students

Students who are having introversion traits and those who preferred work alone energized working alone preferred online learning as the reduced interactions in the online learning environment match their nature. For instance, as stated by P8:

“My social battery runs out very quickly, So, as an introvert, I don’t really mind not having to go out, I do love going outside and like travelling and being connected with selected people but I don’t mind that I have to stay at home, and I find ways to occupy myself so I don’t get bored as easily, so after a while, I managed to make a routine for

myself to keep myself organized and engaged in the new mode of learning.”

Table 2: Positive Online Learning Attitudes Reasons

Themes	Initial Codes
Personality Traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internal orientation - Energize being alone, comfortable when working alone - Conscientiousness – ability to focus, driven by work, thorough
Teaching and Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appropriate teaching techniques - Friendly teaching style - Caring & support from lecturers - Online learning assessment fit - Timely feedback on assessments - Flexibility in the submission of assessments
Learning Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time savings - Escape from university subculture norms - Flexibility & relaxed environment - Receiving a recording - Ability to learn extra skills - Ability to get connected with family - Ability to engage in income generation activity
Institutional Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing Guidelines for online learning - Not delaying in finishing semesters and conducting exams - Emotional support
Crises-driven forced desire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No other alternative - Inability to travel due to fuel crises - Unbearable expenses due to economic crises

Apart from the introversion personality trait, some students who felt a responsibility towards their target, and who were achievement-oriented had positive thinking about online learning. As stated by P16:

“I am a hard worker studying for a purpose and I study well regardless of online or offline. I am rarely careless in my learning and education. I started online learning around two and a half years back. Now I’m in the last couple of weeks of my final year. I was happy with the way I studied and how everything went well. My performance was not affected by moving online.”

Teaching and assessment

There were some reasons related to the lecturer and their teaching styles that helped students to think and feel positive about online learning. For instance, P13 stated how their Maths lecturer was using appropriate teaching aids. It was interesting as there were participants who stated Maths was a subject which was unsuccessful in online mode (As explained in section).

“I really liked the way how our Maths lecturer conducted lectures, her whiteboard can be seen that she uses marker pens and we can clearly

see her steps. There was no difference even though we went online for subjects like this.”

At the same time, lecturers who were friendly in conducting lectures were a reason for forming a positive impression on online learning. As stated by P18:

“There is a one lady lecturer who asks us questions while the lecture is in progress. That is also useful because by that she knows that what she has taught has gone to our heads. Also, even if another student hasn’t understood it, we can always ask the same question again and the answer is provided. That is also a big help to us. She never got annoyed. Without lecturers like this online learning would have been a bitter experience.”

Some students experienced a really hard time during the online learning period as they were having serious signal issues. When they received attention and care during a hard time resulted to have faith in online learning. As stated by P20:

“When I was so upset as I had connection issues, one lecturer called me saying that it’s not a big deal and usual so and so. She gave me the telephone numbers of some officials so that during an examination if I lose the connection, I could call the relevant lecturer and inform him or her about the issue. In such instances, they gave us extra time to submit the paper. So, in that way, we had good support from the lecturers. They supported some students who had financial difficulties too. I realized that online learning is a possible thing with their caring and support.”

In addition to the teaching techniques, teaching style, and caring of lecturers, the way how assessments were conducted is also a reason for forming positive feelings about online learning. Also, giving students sufficient time in submitting exam papers and assignments was a reason to reduce the fear of inability to submit on time. For instance, as stated by P6:

“In our department, we had only viva, in other departments like export and the business departments they have open book examinations mainly and structured questions. I heard many negative stories from lecturers about those types of examinations such as copying. We did

not have any of those assessments. I like the way how exams were done because no one can copy like in MCQs or structured questions. Those assessments did not reduce the quality of our degree program.”

Also, receiving feedback on the assignments and other written documents were helping to feel better about online learning. As stated by P3:

“Once we have submitted the assignment, the lecturer checks it and immediately gives us feedback. Sometimes we are questioned on the assignment as well just to make sure that the assignment was done by ourselves and whether we have understood what was taught. That gives us big support because we can rectify our mistakes and learn something new. When doing the next presentation, we will not make the same mistake again. By getting that feedback I increased my liking for online education.”

Conducive learning environment

Participants of our study perceived some learning-specific benefits that make them feel positive about online learning. Many participants perceived that online learning helped save time allowing them to study well. Participant 13 stated:

“For me, it (online learning) was alive and actually, I like this system. It didn’t bother me at all. I would much prefer this because my time was much saved because if I go for lectures and stay there, and chatting with friends likewise, the time is much wasted but here, I am attending lectures and not having any stress or I mean without wasting my time I am doing my studies well I am doing better; I am performing better actually.”

Also, some participants perceived that there some subculture-related disturbances such as participating in unnecessary meetings and raging had been reduced in online learning. As stated by P5:

“As we all know in every university there is ragging. It is common in our university as well and we had this during the first three months [during physical lectures], so it was difficult for us to follow lectures. Since ragging is common, we had to go through it, but it was a blessing in disguise when we started online sessions.”

Similarly, flexibility was identified as another benefit that was a reason to think positively about online learning. As stated by P20:

“I like the flexibility that I have and study at my own hours which is more effective, I didn’t mind learning online. In the university, if I feel tired I would cut lectures but now I can dress casually and even can lie on the bed and participate in lectures. So, that I don’t miss lectures.”

Many participants perceived having a recording of a lecture as a learning-related benefit of online learning that increased their preference for online learning. Some participants stated that even though re-referring the entire recording is impossible, they can grab the unclear points specifically referring to videos. As stated by P4:

“Even if I have missed lectures or did not understand some points during the lecture I can re-cap them and get them done again. So, that is one of the biggest things I find in this online learning platform.”

Almost all the participants that we interviewed had spent their time following another diploma, improving essential skills such as English, creative writing, video editing, and research other apart from their degree. They revealed that extra learning activities would not have taken place with the routine of onsite learning. As stated by P8:

“If this same time was spent in university, we wouldn’t have been able to do something additional. I did some academic writing and creative writing courses via Coursera. So, that is actually a really good advantage of this online learning. Even if it is not a course, you can learn something from the internet, like to develop your skills, so I think that’s very good. Many of my friends did another course, or an additional something to further learning.”

Many participants of our study stated that they are happy with online learning as they got an opportunity to spend time with their family. Interestingly, we had no supportive data for spending time with family as a reason to enhance online learning performance or engagement. Even though they did not like attending online lectures, the ability to get connected with family was a reason to think positively about online learning. As stated by P11:

“Because of this [online learning] we all got to stay at home and that was, I think, really fun because we got to spend more time together with family, we played some games and everything, so in that way, it was good because we got to connect again as a family.”

Similarly, some of our participants have a positive feeling about online learning since it allows them to engage in income generation activities. Interestingly these participants do not feel participating in online learning is interesting but given the flexibility can be used to spend time generating an income. As stated by P19:

“I felt online learning is really good because I was able to do drop shopping during this time. I could buy a car which would have been impossible if I studied onsite. We can balance both aspects through this mode of learning”

Institutional support

Participants who represented private universities were particularly happy with the way how online-related decisions and guidelines were communicated as well as finishing the academic calendar as planned. Also, the faculty administration had arrangements to support students during an emotionally hard period. Those positive actions helped them to feel positive about online learning. As stated by P8 and P13:

“They communicated all the decisions related to online learning through E-mail and that E-mail was very detailed. They explained all the procedures and the steps that we have to take, and even after that they held an online, MS Teams, they held a virtual conference to explain how each lecture will be delivered how the process works, and how to conduct exams to make it easier for us. Our faculty did not delay to conduct online exams and that helped a lot to save our time.”

“Sometimes people are coming with issues like depression so anyway on campus, we have a counselor so even during the pandemic period we could arrange a session with them online also so if they had a problem, they could manage it. In addition to that, there was a separate committee in handling any issue related to online learning which made many of us feel confident to accept online learning.”

Crises-driven forced desire

Almost all the participants that we interviewed accepted the value of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic as it was impossible to have onsite lectures. They think that online learning is the best option for continuing lectures without delaying for them to complete the lectures on time. Unfortunately, Sri Lanka had to undergo multiple crises in line after the health pandemic. Thus, the online learning duration was extended unexpectedly as the country was facing an economic crisis more than ever before. Reduced transportation and skyrocketing price levels made it impossible for universities to function physically. Hence, our participants once again were forcefully sent online learning in June 2022 and they felt they have no other option than engaging online learning which created a forced/continuance desire rather than having normative desire. As stated by P1 and P20:

“I think stopping all the lectures, all the classes, and all the examinations and postponing them until the pandemic is over is not practical, so online education is better than having no education in the country. Therefore I strove to somehow get through this.”

“We cannot bear the cost of travelling on weekends as we did earlier and the cost of food is so high if we stayed at hostels. So, even though I like to study at the university, the current conditions do not allow it. In that sense, the best thing is following online learning.”

Reasons for Negative Online Learning Attitudes

Table 3: Negative Online Learning Attitudes Reasons

Categories	Description/Open Codes
Personality Traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extroversion – Desire to spend time with friends, feeling unenergetic working alone, Feeling lazy to work alone - Low conscientiousness – Easy Distraction, carelessness
Teaching and Assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Subject teaching mismatch - Inappropriate teaching techniques, inappropriate teaching aids - Delivery Process – One-way communication, monotonous tone, Not showing face - Reduced quality of final exams – Copying, Reduced preparedness - Stress – Over monitoring, Fear of inability to submit on time
Learning Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Home distractions – Noises, family responsibilities, non-conducive learning environment - Technology-driven distractions – Connection issues, Devices related issues

Negative Group Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Freeriding tendency of colleagues; Ignoring the contribution in group assessments, Unresponsive colleagues, keeping silent in group discussions - Creating negative vibes – spreading only the negative aspects of online learning, creating negative group norms
Institutional Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time inefficiencies: Delayed in starting online learning, delayed in finishing a semester, delayed in conducting exams - Communication issues – No channel to communicate with relevant authorities, One-way communication - Lack of monitoring mechanism – Lack of online learning guidelines

Personality traits

Participants who are extroverts in nature felt that online learning is not appropriate for them and they were worrying about shifting online learning as a result of missing physical interactions with friends. As stated by P1:

“Having friends, having fun with them and experiences like collecting memories are important for me. I think when we are with friends all the time, we have mental relaxation I don’t like to do a job even which is separate from society, There are some friends of mine, who really like online lectures, they are not like me, not social. I cannot imagine how I could continue for another 01 year like this.”

Apart from introversion, participants who are distracted easily, careless, and lack of inner drive to pursue goals had negative feelings about online learning. As stated by P10 and P13:

“I am a person who cannot pay attention and that kind of wreaked havoc on the whole online learning thing because paying attention is difficult for me. In physical learning, there is pressure to learn since the lecturer can see me. But here if I am on my phone or if I am reading a book, or if I am scribbling on a piece of paper, I know that there is no one to look at me. So mostly there is a possibility to go to YouTube or FB, or Instagram, or focus on our personal stuff at home. That is why online learning is useless.”

“I know there are some of my friends who are really genuine because there are network issues. But some guys neglect lectures and team projects intentionally. So, regardless of the platform that is who they are. If someone is neglecting lectures or other projects, it shouldn’t be a problem with the platform I believe, if they are neglecting, it’s

something with their carelessness.”

Teaching and assessments

Inappropriate teaching and assessment methods in online learning were reasons for the participants to think, feel, and behave negatively about online learning.

In particular, the teaching methods used in Maths-related subjects were perceived to be negatively leading to reduced interest in attending those lectures particularly. As stated by P2 and P10:

“Some subjects such as Maths really hard to understand what is actually being taught in this method [online]. Our Maths lecturer didn’t use the whiteboard and just taught us to use power points. I was not much interested in this lecture. So even don’t know whether I’m going to fall asleep or I just want to grab something to drink so I just leave the lecture. We actually didn’t get a single thing.”

“I remember there was one Maths lecture it was by far the worst. I can still remember it. It was a pre-recorded lecture, and he was just going on and it was a new lesson also. He was teaching us new rules of inference or something like that and it was just going on and children were flooding the chat box with we don’t understand, we don’t understand but it’s pre-recorded.”

Many of our participants stated that they felt bored when the lecturers did not switch on their webcams. Although students didn’t have much desire to switch on their webcams, they felt switching on the camera of the lecturer is very important.

“Some lecturers didn’t switch on the cameras but I feel interested if the lecturers had switched on their cameras because half of the communication is non-verbal and if I can see your face, it feels like you are looking at me. When it is a faceless lecture it’s really boring.”

Also, the lecturers who did not deliver the contents interestingly on an online platform contributed to forming negative attitudes among the participants. As stated by P20, 13, and P10:

“Some lecturers’ slides are very traditional; they just use plain PPTs and just only text, no colors, not attractive, so boring, and no animations, so naturally, we tend to sleep.”

“Some lecturers were talking a lot which is really boring. There were some students who came to the lecture room just to get the attendance done and not to listen to the lectures. So, there are some lecturers that we really detest, because we felt it was really boring to go into that lecture.”

“We had one lecturer who is very calm but in a zoom lecture it’s like a “Bana” sort of like it’s very monotonous, it was so boring and I wasn’t the only one who felt that way...My friends send personal messages or scroll on Facebook during such lectures... “

Similar to teaching, online assessments were perceived to be negative as the assessment methods and online exams created negative experiences and impressions. As stated by P10 and P1 quality of the online exams is suspicious as given below:

“Many students are involved in copying in the subjects like English because you have to fill in the blanks and like those continuous assessments where it is small so letter writing and all you can quite easily get people to help or check other people’s work. Part of our ICT continuous assessments was we had to answer ten MCQs from ten lessons and definitely, there was a PDF that was being passed around with all the correct answers. So, the quality of online learning is problematic.”

“For online exams, our preparation is less than the physical examinations because we can make short notes and put them somewhere and do the online examinations or quizzes or MCQ papers, which reduces the value of education in Sri Lanka.”

Also, as the students come from diverse backgrounds, they experienced inequalities in online exams when compared to physical exams. As stated by P1:

“I feel really bad about online examinations. I think physical exams are really good. Mainly, online examinations are really unfair. Some

students forward and they have some tips and tricks and even get support from family members. But there are some students who are helpless. They can't even write answers on their own due to worrying about submitting time. Sometimes, the background is not also the same some people have calm and quiet exam-friendly backgrounds and some have noisy, and connections that are not equal for all. So, I think an examination should be very fair and stress-free. But online examinations are not stress-free.”

Some participants were overly monitored during online exams creating very negative feelings about online exams. As stated by P13:

“Online examinations were a really big headache...we are doing the examination in a monitoring environment, and it is really, even it's hard to concentrate sometimes because we feel like always someone is looking at us. It is really uncomfortable. It's okay to conduct online lectures but not online exams at all.”

Learning environment

Issues encountered in the online learning environment (i.e., the home environment) created feelings within some participants that physical lectures are better than online lectures. In particular, the distractions in the home environment, lack of persuasion to learn in the home setup, and mostly connection issues were the reasons for forming negative online learning attitudes. As stated by P3:

“One paper I did with no connection issues. During the second exam, I could not connect at all during the stipulated time. My home is located in a hilly area therefore due to climatic changes there are connection issues. So I was frustrated about online learning.”

Negative group dynamics

As all the students have completed formative group assessments, online collaborations are essential in completing those. However, some participants felt how frustrated they are as their colleagues' support was not received during online group assessments feeling distressed about online learning. As stated by P2 and P11:

“I finished two or three assignments but some persons say “ah I just woke up”. So there were some people like that but somehow or the other way, even though some people are lazy and do not contribute and enjoy their lives at home. If this was done physically we can get things done somehow.”

“Even on the day of the presentation, they are not at home, many excuses such as it is raining, and I have a connection issue and I have to put on a reload but I don’t have any now. Some are even not online and not answering their phones, we just try to call, call, call, it’s like there is an instance that there are three people not doing. It is a headache doing group assignments in this mode.”

Also, as online learning started, the use of communication platforms such as Whatsapp, Viber, Telegram, etc was popular among the students. Our participants revealed how the messages and discussions taking place on those communication platforms created some negative vibes on online learning. As stated by P2 and P17:

“There are people who have already turned their minds towards negativity and they just brainwash others that this is not good, this is useless and they were also told, this online thing is useless, etc. So my friends think that this is useless.”

“We have common WhatsApp groups with our batch mates. Some messages were shared saying not to switch on webcams. Even though I like to switch on the camera, it is not possible as the majority do not like it.”

Institutional issues

Many of our participants who represented state universities had negative attitudes toward online learning as the university administration failed to take timely decisions and communicate effectively. As stated by P4, P10, and P17:

“When the first wave (COVID -19) we were writing an exam. So, we were sent home without completing the exam. Then we had to wait a long time [around 8 months] doing nothing as the faculty had no decision to start a new semester or do exams online. The reason was

that some students were having signal issues but in our batch, it was only one student who had signal issues. Then many boys deviated from learning and shifted to money-generation activities like drop shopping.”

“I had a very positive impression of online learning but our faculty spent much time thinking about whether to do online exams or not. After finishing our first semester, we spent nearly 5 months doing nothing. It’s so pathetic they kept us for nearly five months at home and I was so much of hopeless and understood online learning will never be successful in my university.”

“We had some WhatsApp groups but those were very official so they muted all the participants except the admins so we can’t text. So, I’m already in a department but I’m still in a common course program There was no way to ask our questions leaving many doubts.”

In addition, allowing too much flexibility and lack of a monitoring mechanism for students was perceived to be a reason for not attending lectures. As stated by P4:

“During physical lectures 80% attendance was compulsory and it was strictly followed too. There was a grapevine that 80% will be applied online too. So, initially, everybody was logged and gradually felt that it was not a consideration. Then our friends started not to log in to sessions as it was in the beginning. 80% can be a small rule but has a huge impact. Without control and small rules participating in lectures has been reduced.”

Our study findings do align with previous research findings as well as uncovered some unique findings too which will be discussed in the forthcoming section.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Many of previous studies revealed that participants perceive many online learning benefits when compared to onsite learning. For example reduced costs (Saleh et al., 2021), flexibility (Yates et al., 2020), ability to learn new technologies (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020), the ability to watch the lessons again (Mishra et al., 2020), educational opportunity in a comfortable

environment (Fatonía et al., 2020), and devoting more time to family members (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). While our study confirmed these benefits, the ability to engage in an income generation activity was also identified as a benefit of online learning that enhanced participants' desire to continue in online learning. However, the desire to engage in income generation would not necessarily enhance the study performance but allow balancing in-between learning and income generation reducing the stress of depending on parents as young individuals, particularly in economic crises.

Similar to previous studies we also found reduced social interactions (Dutta & Smita, 2020) inability to collaborate with peers effectively (Yates et al., 2020), difficulties in communicating with lecturers (Fatonía et al., 2020), unsupportive learning conditions at home (Yates et al., 2020) and technical problems (Dutta & Smita, 2020) are the disadvantages of online learning. However, our study goes one step beyond the previous findings as these were identified as reasons for forming negative attitudes toward online learning.

One of the salient features of online learning is the simultaneous presence of benefits and disadvantages that might create a negative or neutral perception of online learning. Yet, despite many disadvantages, our participants have positive feelings toward online learning since it is the only way to continue the education of young individuals who are impatiently waiting to enter the job market. Although the forced or continuance desire might not equal a normative desire, in a critical time a forced commitment may help substantially to continue in online learning. This finding aligns with a previous study that found the positive view of the general public of the South Asian region toward online learning in a difficult time of continuing education without disruption (Shafana & Safnas, 2022).

The findings of Perera and Abeyesekara (2022) revealed that eLearning quality has an impact on the intention to use e-learning among the undergraduates of a selected university in Sri Lanka. This finding was confirmed by our study and we also elaborated on many aspects of teaching and assessment methods help or obstruct forming positive attitudes toward online learning.

There are previous studies that examined the importance of the psychological traits of students in deciding outcomes of online learning. For instance, Hettiarachchi et al. (2021), found that students who are self-reliant

and have learning motivation were more satisfied with online learning. As our study also found students who are conscientious in nature, characterized by self-motivated, and target driven have positive thinking and feeling tendencies towards online learning. Although the previous evidence is rare, individuals with introversion personality traits also felt positive about learning online mode.

As highlighted by the previous studies (e.g., Hollister et al., 2022), university administration support and actions are crucial in positive thinking, and feeling toward online learning. Many of the state university students in our study were having negative thoughts about online learning since the administration had no fixed plan and monitoring mechanism in conducting online learning and assessments.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although online learning is totally a new experience for the present participants and there are inherent disadvantages of online learning, our participants have navigated through online learning for nearly two and a half years. When we dig down, our participants formed positive, negative thinking and feeling patterns toward online learning mainly depending on their psychological, teaching, and learning techniques, learning environment, colleagues, and administration-related reasons. Our study concludes that despite the variations in the attitudes in general, almost all the participants felt positive about online learning since it is the only way to continue their studies starting from the health pandemic to ongoing economic crises up to the date (i.e., September 2022).

There are some studies conducted in understanding students' attitudes toward online learning during the pandemic. Those studies uncovered the factors that impact some outcome variables of online learning such as online learning engagement and satisfaction (e.g., Hettiarachchi et al., 2021; Hollister et al., 2022, Perera and Abeysekera, 2022). Although we have not quantified the effects, our study brought into awareness many reasons behind positive and negative thinking, feeling and behavioural patterns related to online learning. In doing so, our study expanded the three components attitudinal model (Robbins et al., 2019) in the online learning domain by analyzing the specific online learning attitudes. In addition, although previous scholars viewed forced commitment in a negative tone during a change implementation

(Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002), our study implies the importance of forced desire in developing positive sentiments toward online learning, particularly in crisis times.

The adaptation of online teaching, learning and assessment practices which were started or enhanced during the Covid-19 continued during the economic crisis. Learnings from online mode education are seen to be implemented even in the post-crisis period as in hybrid mode, and it will continue to grow. The present study has some important implications for the practice. First, the role of lecturers and administration is crucial in developing a positive attitude toward online learning. Although it is true that psychological factors have an impact on feeling better about online learning, contextual factors also are a powerful source in forming positive online learning attitudes. Thus, our study informs particularly to the lecturers on the importance of using appropriate online teaching and assessment techniques rather than relying on traditional and inappropriate methods. Also, our findings inform university administration to be responsible for implementing online learning without being delayed in making the right decisions at the right time. Also, inevitably the infrastructure is important in successfully continuing online learning. Thus, through our findings, we inform the government agents to develop the technological infrastructure of the country. If not the forced desire will be turned into totally negative, otherwise would have been turned into a normative desire.

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