

Students' Perceptions of Distance Learning During the Corona Pandemic Crisis: The Kuwaiti Private Universities as a Case Study

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic was a real challenge for many governments and private entities, especially for educational institutions around the world. Schools and universities were forced to consider adopting distance learning (DL), rather than the traditional face-to-face teaching method. Although several studies suggest that DL can be as effective as traditional classroom teaching, a few studies have focused on student satisfaction with online instruction, particularly during a period of rapid transition to distance learning. This study investigates the level of student acceptance of distance learning in private universities in Kuwait. The factors which are examined in the study are technology, social presence, and the quality of learning. The sample of the study consists of student-participants taken from five private universities in Kuwait who answered the online questionnaire. The findings suggest that to enhance the DL environment, universities need to address these factors seriously in order to help students adapt to the new learning environment. The paper concludes that DL requires different circumstances than those required for the face-to-face setting. Understanding students' attitudes toward DL is the key to developing and implementing successful online learning.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Students' Perceptions, Private University, Traditional learning, Quality of learning

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Background:

Before the Corona pandemic, distance learning (DL) was not a common teaching/learning method at universities in Kuwait, whether governmental or private. No DL degree is approved by the higher education authorities in Kuwait. The only exception was the Arab Open University (AOU) that was established in 2001, where many courses are provided online. The traditional knowledge delivery system for universities was a classroom setting, where the faculty members give lectures while students listen and communicate face-to-face with their instructors. Interaction between faculty member and students was considered an essential learning element.

The Corona pandemic crisis has forced the private universities to resort to DL to reduce the risk of spreading the virus and to conform with government regulations. Face-to-face classes were suspended for a few weeks in order to prepare the tools required for the transformation to the new teaching environment. It took universities a while to adapt to the new situation. The switch from the traditional learning model to DL was a huge challenge for educational institutions, especially for instructors, administrators, and students. The complete switch occurred during a single semester and required quick decision making and implementation, which added to the challenge. Students at private universities were given the choice of completing the semester through DL or waiting until September 2020 to resume the suspended semester. Many students liked the idea of DL and took this opportunity to try the new way of learning. The technological challenges, especially finding the proper user-friendly online learning platform were the main concern. This sudden switch naturally caused serious concerns about educational quality and the effectiveness of teaching. Instructors have been very concerned about maintaining the minimum level of learning when using DL. The reliability of evaluation is considered one of the major encounters for DL, where the opportunity for cheating and plagiarism is highly increased in comparison with the traditional face to face teaching system (Bretag et al. 680). Cheating during online examinations is one of the main challenges in DL.

Instructors were forced to adjust methods of student assessment to cope with the online learning environment. Creating questions about logical sequences, using various versions of examinations, restricting the testing window, setting up the examination to show one question at a time and prohibiting backtracking, changing the sequence of test questions, and avoiding multiple choice questions are techniques that have been used to reduce the possibility of cheating. In addition, asking the student to open the camera of their computer or mobile to verify their identity and deploying timed quizzes and exams were also used. One strategy for enhancing quality assurance in DL is to apply solid techniques and strategies to ensure efficient teaching and learning experience (Andrade et al. 1).

DL has been increasing in higher education institutions for some years, especially in the Western world. DL has been adopted by many respected universities at the Master and PhD levels. Some universities have offered undergraduate programs or offered DL as a complement to traditional courses. It is estimated that the market for online education will reach \$350 billion by 2025 (Koksal 3). There is an ongoing debate among academics about whether the quality of online learning is equal to that of face-to-face education. Calderon and Jones conducted a study in the US that found 55% of faculty members disagreed or strongly disagreed that student learning outcomes in online courses were comparable to face-to-face courses (3). Only 19% faculty members agree or strongly agree that student learning outcomes for online courses are comparable to face-to-face courses. On this evidence, faculty attitudes are a significant barrier to expanding DL.

High-quality education cannot be ensured only by adopting online learning, especially at the undergraduate level. There are many challenges related to the technological limitations, including issues of access, connection, and familiarity with the Internet. Although the advancement of technology has overcome some obstacles, others have only been shifted on to learners, as the users of the DL system (Al-Fadhli and Khalfan 535). In a study of Community College Student outcomes in online courses, Jaggars and Xu concluded that they performed worse than students in face-to-face courses (25). There are also many difficulties related to technological factors, including issues of Internet speed, and the availability of laptops, tablets, or smart phones. Social factors seem to be even more important. With no physical contact, learners in DL environments may feel isolated and unmotivated (Roddy et al. 8 ; Saadé and Bahli 319). To create a successful system of DL, it is important to take students' attitudes towards DL into consideration (Guest et al. 3).

The purpose of this study is to assess the importance of technical, social, and quality of learning factors in shaping student acceptance of DL at private universities in Kuwait. A set of hypotheses related to DL have been tested using a structured questionnaire completed by students.

Factors Influencing Distance-Learning Acceptance

Some researchers in this field believe that DL is simply a version of the standard teaching and learning method (Compeau and Higgins 118). The use of advanced technology has raised questions about the effectiveness and quality of DL compared with the face-to-face format. There is an ongoing debate among researchers on the best practice to transform the traditional face-to-face classes into a successful DL environment (McBrien et al. 14; Rovai and Barnum 58). Platform quality (the quality of content, system stability, technical support), students' personal factors (student

attitudes and the effect of engagement), and the quality of teaching (the timing of instructor response, instructor attitude (IAT) towards online learning, interaction, and communication between instructors / students) are the main factors for creating a successful online environment (Mo et al. 4). Students' acceptance of DL is a critical factor that should be considered in assessing the effective adoption of DL to support teaching-learning activities (Martins and Kellermanns 17).

Factors Related to Quality Assurance of Distance Learning

Quality assurance is an important challenge for higher education in general, and for DL environments in particular. Difficulty in defining the meaning of quality poses challenges for developing methods to assess quality, and setting criteria to judge quality (Zuhairi et al. 299). Quality assurance according to Masoumi can be classified into seven dimensions: instructional design, pedagogy, technology, evaluation, student support, institutional support, and faculty support (67). Although DL offers many advantages and opportunities, many researchers still believe that the quality of learning in face-to-face learning is superior (Meyer48; Simonson 35).

However, other studies conclude that students in DL can do better than their counterparts in face-to-face sessions (Means et al.32), or show that delivery methods have no significant impact on student learning outcomes (DiRienzo and Lilly 10). Quality of learning is described as the degree or level of excellence of all aspects of learning (Ghufron and Hardiyanto 259). However, researchers cannot agree on the tools to evaluate the quality of learning without a clear criteria of for the quality of learning, the debate about the quality of learning in DL compared to face-to-face learning will continue (Rovai and Barnum 58).

H1: The perceived quality of learning in DL is inferior to that of traditional learning.

Social Presence Factor

Learning is not the mere transfer of knowledge from instructor to learner. The quality of learning is affected by the social environment of the learning process. The importance of social presence in distance learning is central to Social Presence Theory that was first introduced by Short, Williams, and Christie, where social presence is defined as "degree of salience of the other persons in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (65). Social Presence Theory highlights the important role of social learning and relationship building in student engagement and inclusion in online learning (Lowenthal and Dunlap 495). Some later researchers conceptualized the idea of social presence by focusing on the way people use and adapt to a communication medium, rather than on the qualities of the medium itself (Gunawardena 150; Rourke et al. 57). Garrison et al . developed subcategories for

the social presence: emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion (23). Lowenthal and Dunlap identified indicators of each of these categories in order to study them in online discussions (496).

In DL, students should feel connected and get involved in a successful learning (So and Kim 612). Social presence seems to be critical to distance learners' perceptions of psychological distance from the instructor and their colleagues (Gunawardena and McIsaac 374; Kim et al. 1516). The degree to which a learner feels personally connected to other students and the teacher in an online learning community is referred to as 'social presence' in online learning settings (Sung and Mayer 1739).

DL environments that are supposed to offer interactive learning should be designed to fit with the social nature of the learning process. Social collaboration gives the students the opportunities to express themselves while enriching and expanding their understanding by examining the views of others (Parra 1436; Richardson and Swan73).

Based on the previously surveyed literature, it can be hypothesized that

H2: Social presence plays an essential role in the success of distance learning systems.

Technological Factors

The use of Information Technology in DL suggests that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) play a crucial role in this field. The rapid evolution of technology offers great opportunities for virtual classes and for delivering course materials by sophisticated means. Both synchronous networks (e.g., virtual office hours) and asynchronous networks (e.g., e-mail) are used in DL. According to Poon et al., developing countries still lack the technological aspects required for DL systems, because their IT infrastructures lag far behind those of industrialized countries (379). A study conducted by Al-araibi et al. concluded that technological challenges are the main encounter to the success of e-learning systems. It also found that 45% of e-learning projects in developing countries are total failures, 40% are partial failures, and only 15% are successful(571) . There are many difficulties such as poor network infrastructure, slow Internet, absence of computer self-efficacy and weakness of content development that challenge the successful development of e-learning systems in developing countries (Aung and Khaing 407; Kanwal and Rehman 10968). For DL to be successful, there is a need for e-readiness. E-readiness should include hardware equipment, communication networks, logistics, and speed of Internet.

H3: Technological factors are a major concern for students in distance learning courses.

Methodology

A descriptive-quantitative research design has been adopted in this study. The sample of the study consists of student-participants, who have been taken from five private universities in Kuwait. These include GUST, ACK, AUK, and KILAW⁽¹⁾. These five universities have the majority number of students among the 12 private universities in Kuwait, and so it was more convenient to gather responses from students at these ones. The data have been collected from a convenience sample of respondents. The responses have been collected through SurveyMonkey online site. The link of the survey generated by SurveyMonkey has been distributed to the targeted students through the student's unions at those universities. A questionnaire written in Arabic was designed to capture data on the following variables: technological factors (TF), social presence (SP) and quality of learning (QL).

The questionnaire is composed of two sections. The first includes demographic questions (i.e., gender, GPA, and declared major). The second part of the survey consists of questions about the students' perceptions of DL, e.g., whether DL encourages students to skip classes and whether DL is better than the face-to-face method. The questionnaire has been distributed by faculty members at the private universities.

The final version of the questionnaire has been revised to overcome some minor challenges, such as potential ambiguity. A total of 22 questions were developed to collect data on all the variables and factors necessary to test the hypotheses. Each statement in the second part of the questionnaire is based on a Likert scale, and each answer is assigned weights to establish normally distributed scores.

Data Collection

Participating students have been asked to respond to the items on the questionnaire. The data have been coded, and the items have been examined for a response pattern. There has been no need to modify the instrument based on input from respondents. In total, 603 questionnaires have been collected from students. The online surveys have been conducted and collected between May 1, 2020, and May 17, 2020.

Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's alpha has been computed for each scale to ensure the reliability of the test measurement (internal consistency). A pilot study has been conducted to examine the reliability and validity of the survey instrument. These pilot responses have been excluded from the original study. The alpha scores for the three factors are as follows: Quality factors 0.711 (10 items), Social factors 0.778 (4 items) and Technological factors 0.846 (2 items).

Results and Analysis

The questionnaire has examined student satisfaction with the DL model. Students' acceptance can be defined as students' perception of the college experience and perceived value of education (Astin 75). In other words, this questionnaire has attempted to identify students' attitudes toward DL. Identifying such attitudes would determine critical success factors of DL.

SPSS version 21.0 has been used to perform statistical data analyses. The survey data are descriptively examined, and a comprehensive set of descriptive statistics is employed to examine the hypotheses. Two different statistical methods of analysis are employed. The means and response percentages are generated via descriptive statistics in order to compare them to each other and to the designated critical point/cut-off point. The inferential method is used as the second technique, which added validity to the descriptive statistical data. The p-values of the research hypotheses are calculated using this method and compared to a significance level of 0.05 using the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test.

Respondents' Demographic Data

The respondents' demographic variables included their gender, credits earned, and GPA. Out of 603 respondents, 382 (63%) are females and 221 (37%) are males. Table 1 shows the demographic data. The majority of students at Kuwait private universities are females.

Table 1: The Respondents' Demographic Data

Gender		
	Frequency	Percent
Population	603	100%
1 (Male)	221	36.7%
2 (Female)	382	63.3%
Credits Earned		
	Frequency	Percent
1 (0-30)	68	11.3%
2 (31-60)	136	22.5%

Gender		
	Frequency	Percent
Population	603	100%
1 (Male)	221	36.7%
2 (Female)	382	63.3%
3 (61-90)	180	29.9%
4 (91+)	219	36.3%
GPA		
	Frequency	Percent
1 (Below 2.0)	38	6.3%
2 (2.0 – 2.67)	180	29.9%
3 (2.68 – 3.33)	227	37.6%
4. (Above 3.33)	158	26.2%

Hypotheses Testing and Discussion

To test the research hypotheses, one-way ANOVA correlation analyses have been conducted. Correlation analyses have been used to determine both the strength and the sign of the association between predictor factors (quality of learning, social presence, and technological factors).

H1: Learning Perceived Quality in DL is Inferior to that of Traditional Learning

More than half of the participants (57%; $n = 345$) think that DL is suitable for their courses, while only 23% ($n = 137$) disagree with that, and the remaining participants are neutral (20%; $n = 121$). These findings go in line with Mo et al. survey study's, where 552 respondents indicate that students will continue using online once they feel the online platform is easy to navigate (4). Table 2 shows the results of students' attitudes toward the learning perceived quality in the DL environment.

Table 2: DL Learning Perceived Quality

	Means	SDs
DL provided more flexibility to learn	2.3638	1.22327
DL suits the courses that I am learning	2.4643	1.29783
DL helped me comprehend the course contents	2.8607	1.31961
Student were careless about submitting homework	3.1096	1.29813
Assessment by instructors were more subjective in DL than in a face-to-face environment	2.6844	1.04955
DL encourages students to skip classes	3.1542	1.35584
Communication with the instructor in DL is better than in traditional settings	2.9469	1.43190
Adopting DL is more difficult than traditional learning	3.2458	1.30123
Learning in DL is more beneficial than the face-to-face method	3.1664	1.30599

Having a quick look at the tables above, the results indicate there is a little significant level of association between students' gender and DL quality ($M=2.78$, $SD=.728$), and female ($M=2.87$, $SD=.662$), $t(601)=1.476$, $p=.140$, but there is no significant association with students' credit earned or GPA. Respondents have had a positive attitude toward the opportunity that DL offers them to learn, and they think that DL is suitable for their courses. It turns out that males are more likely to believe that DL encouraged students not to submit their homework on time.

H2: Social presence plays an essential role in the success of distance learning systems

Seventy percent ($n=420$) of the participants confirm that instructors maintain continuous contact with them through email and during interactive sessions. Besides, 61% ($n=368$) confirm that there is sufficient time for discussion through the online lectures. In general, participants are relatively satisfied with the new experience, and 58% ($n = 351$) of the participants expressed willingness to take another course through online learning. The results do not indicate any significant level of association between

gender, credit earned, and GPA, and the social factors of the DL environment, but there are differences between universities [$F(581,18) = 1.933, p = 0.012$].

H3: Technological factors are a major concern for students in distance learning courses.

Forty six percent ($n=279$) of respondents faced a technical problem, either during the lecture or during the quizzes and exams. These problems included being unable to log in to the communication system, repeated disconnection, low quality of instructor voice, and inability to activate the camera during the exam, which is required by the university to verify the identity of the candidate. However, 70% ($n = 420$) of the respondents think that DL offers them flexibility and quick access to their instructors. Among the participants, 41% ($n=248$) believe that communication with instructors in online learning is better than that in face-to-face communication. It can therefore be concluded that technical difficulties play an essential role in respondents' acceptance of distance learning. To enhance the effectiveness of online learning, technical difficulties need to be addressed. The quality and speed of the Internet seems to play a crucial role in DL. The universities' computer servers also need to be powerful enough to accommodate the heavy Internet traffic during online sessions. These results are consistent with previous studies which indicate that technical difficulties like poor network, slow Internet or user friendly platform are vital to develop a good e-learning environment in which many Arab developing countries, including Kuwait can have (Aung and Khaing 407; Kanwal and Rehman 10968). The results do not indicate any significant level of association between students' GPA or gender and their attitudes toward the technical factors of the DL environment except for the flexibility that DL provides for students, which is associated with gender. Communicating with instructor in a better manner in DL is the only variable that is significantly correlated with the number of credits completed by respondents.

Table 3 below presents the level of significance of the ANOVA between gender, GPA, and the various variables. Gender is found not to be significant except in relation to the statements: "DL leads students to be permissive" and "Having technological difficulties during the lectures". GPA is found to be a significant factor for the number of students believing that DL is more flexible than traditional learning. In general, the quality factor is found to be the one that most affects respondents' attitudes toward online learning. Out of five significance items showed in the table, the quality factor is the most prominent.

Table 3: The level of significance of the ANOVA between various variables.

	Factor	Sig
DL will make students permissive in submitting their homework	Quality	.007
DL gives students better flexibility in learning	Quality	.048
DL encourage students not to attend the lectures	Quality	.001
Had technological difficulties with DL	Technological	.003
Instructor was in direct touch during the course	Social	.014

Conclusion

With the huge advances in the ICT field, DL has become a characterizing feature of education. A big number of universities have adopted DL in their Master and PhD programs. Some have even extended DL to the undergraduate level. This study has examined the importance of technical social learning and the relevant quality factors through a sample of student respondents involved in distance learning at private universities in Kuwait. Among the three factors discussed in this study, the technological barrier seems to be the least challenging one. With the rapid enhancement in the technology sector, technical problems can be easily overcome. Social presence is the second priority. Youths can adapt quickly to the new DL environment if proper training is given by the universities. However, the learning perceived quality in DL remains the main factor in switching from face-to-face learning to DL. This agrees with previous studies that substantiate that students still believe face-to-face is better than DL (Meyer 48; Simonson 35). Much is needed to enhance DL and make it reliable and successful. The methods of assessment need to be redesigned and adjusted to accommodate DL. Assessment methods used in traditional learning may not be appropriate for DL because of the difficulty of checking student identity during the assessment. Multiple choice questions may not be the proper method of assessment. Open book examinations, essay questions and oral exams could be more suitable methods.

Understanding students' attitudes toward distance learning is the first step toward

developing and implementing a successful online learning environment. The primary objective of this study is to analyze the factors influencing students' acceptance of DL. In order to develop online learning programs, higher education institutions should focus on student satisfaction and ability to engage in those classes. The findings suggest that to enhance distance learning systems, distance learning institutions need to address the following issues: technological factors, the social environment, and quality of learning. The findings of the present study indicate that students' acceptance of distance learning is affected by the three factors addressed in the hypothesis. Such findings indicate that increased technology by itself does not guarantee a good learning experience. Hence, technology is not a goal in itself; rather, it is a way to attain a desired outcome. Indeed, this goes in line with previous work of Martins and Kellermanns, which stresses the importance of technological factor to gain students' acceptance of DL (17).

Forty-nine respondents conveyed willingness to take future DL course. These responses show positive attitudes towards the DL environment. This conclusion is in harmony with Mo et al. study's which contends that students reveal willingness to online learning when they feel it's easy course (4). Students' attitudes also reflect a concern for socialization in the DL environment (see Table 2 for details). This concern could be caused by students' first-hand experience with DL environment in Kuwait.

The following are some key recommendations based on the research findings:

- 1) The number of students in distance learning courses needs to be in small numbers, to enable the instructor to handle the needs of the students. Keeping the class small improves the communication and interaction among the students and faculty as well as giving students more time to adapt to this new academic DL environment.
- 2) Faculty members / instructors should be given a proper training to run and handle DL courses. Faculty members should be introduced to appropriate methods for transmitting their lectures and communicating with students online. Workshops should be led by DL professionals who can discuss the logic of the DL environment, its concepts, and instructional activities.
- 3) Studying online is a completely new experience for many students. Therefore, instructors need to ensure that students develop a sense of social community in the distance learning environment. This can be accomplished by replying to students' questions and concerns quickly, establishing discussion groups, recording lectures for later review, and creating virtual office hours.
- 4) The educational platform used by institutions should be equipped with all the teaching and learning tools to provide a comfortable learning environment.

- 5) More studies should be conducted on the attitudes of students with special needs or disabilities in order to ease their academic journey in the DL.
- 6) Since this study has been conducted during the first DL course during the pandemic in Kuwait, other studies need to be conducted to examine the same factors during other semesters to measure the students' perceptions of DL after several courses and to measure their satisfaction with the quality of the offered DL courses.

Limitation

Each study encounters certain limitations, and this study is not an exception. The main obstacle the authors faced is obtaining a bigger population due to the limited number of private universities at Kuwait. However, since this is an exploratory study during the Corona virus pandemic, the population and sample can be considered sufficiently enough for the purposes of this study.

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(Endnotes)

1 AUM: American University of the Middle East (n = 230)

GUST: Gulf University for Science and Technology (n = 187)

ACK: Australian College of Kuwait (n = 22)

AUK: American University of Kuwait (n = 71)

KILAW: Kuwait International Law School (n = 52)

مجلة دراسات الخليج والجزيرة العربية



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صدر العدد الأول منها في يناير عام 1975م

رئيس التحرير

أ. د. عثمان حمود الخضر

ترحب المجلة بنشر البحوث والدراسات العلمية المتعلقة بشؤون
منطقة الخليج والجزيرة العربية في مختلف المجالات العلمية.

ومن أبوابها

- البحوث العربية
- البحوث الإنجليزية
- البحوث الفرنسية

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