Undergraduate students' experience of emergency online learning and its challenges

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Abstract

One consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic was emergency online learning leading to extensive research worldwide to identify its challenges from the perspective of students. However, there is still room for a more in-depth analytical framework to understand how the students felt about and perceived it. Drawing upon Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor theory, this paper explores the 'metaphorical representation' of a group of undergraduate students' experiences at a Malaysian university via a semi-structured interview. There were 57 participants. The obtained data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis as well as MAXQDA Software. The findings reveal five main challenges due to the five changes brought about by emergency online learning in terms of 'learning environment, class assignments, interaction, information delivery, and lecturer/student role'. Finally, this paper ends with suggestions to address the identified challenges as well as making recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Adult learning; COVID-19; metaphor analysis; online learning; remote teaching.

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1. Introduction

COVID-19 affected almost all aspects of societies worldwide, one of which was the higher education sector. The transition from traditional classes to emergency online learning was not smooth in many countries and for many students (Donham et al., 2022; Alamri, 2023). Malaysia's higher education and its large number of local and international students were no exception in suffering the challenges of the pandemic (Chung et al., 2020; Moy & Ng, 2021; Nazilah et al., 2021; Selvanathan et al., 2023).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysian universities and colleges shifted to emergency online learning, and major steps were taken by the Malaysian government to provide conducive learning conditions for all Malaysians such as providing internet allowance to students from low-income families (Selvanathan et al., 2023). In line with these efforts, some studies reported improvement in online learning conditions in Malaysia; however, these studies also reported lack of adaptability, unreadiness, or unwillingness among the majority of Malaysian students regarding the current online learning practices (Chung et al., 2020; Moy & Ng, 2021; Nazilah et al., 2021; Selvanathan et al., 2020). Studies in other countries have yielded similar results (Dost et al., 2020; Mahyoob, 2021; Muthuprasad et al., 2021; Maraqa et al., 2022).

While these studies provide valuable insights into various aspects of emergency online learning, they do not fully reveal how the students felt about and perceived this learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chung et al., 2020; Moy & Ng, 2021; Nazilah et al., 2021; Selvanathan et al., 2020; Dost et al., 2020; Maraqa et al., 2022). The felt gap was the main motivation behind this study in a Malaysian university to investigate how the students felt about and perceived their experience of emergency online learning and its challenges during COVID-19. By employing an in-depth analytical framework, this study contributes to our understanding of why many students did not cope with emergency online classes even though the initial challenges such as having access to a stable internet connection or owning an appropriate computer device were solved for the majority of them.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Emergency online learning vs. Online education

While the literature seems replete with studies on students' perception regarding online classes, a closer look reveals that a noticeable part of the literature is related to the time – mainly before COVID-19 – when the students had freedom in choosing between online and face-to-face classes based on their needs such as (i) the perceived flexible nature of online classes allowing them to manage their education and their other commitments (e.g., work or family); and (ii) its time-saving nature allowing the students to save travel time to and from classes (Picciano, 2002; Horspool & Lange, 2012; Glazier, 2016). In this sense, Xie et al., (2021) differentiate between 'online education' and 'emergency remote teaching', with 'online education' referring to an online mode of teaching developed and offered based on the student's preferences and needs, and 'emergency remote teaching (ERT)' referring to the emergency approach taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to provide a temporary, fast, and reliable education in the context of the pandemic (for a detailed comparison see Xie et al., (2021). Therefore, in the same vein, the term 'online education' in this study is differentiated from 'emergency remote teaching', or interchangeably, 'emergency online learning'.

A review of the literature on emergency online learning reveals that many of its aspects still require further and more in-depth investigation. For instance, many studies prove the importance of the learning environment on students' learning outcomes (Said et al., 2009; Shrestha et al., 2019). Dost et al., (2020) in a survey of 2721 medical students in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic found that one of the commonly perceived barriers to using 'online education' was a family distraction. However, very little is available regarding how the students perceived and felt about the new learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, that is 'home'. Another aspect of emergency online learning that still requires further investigation is interaction, which has been much more extensively

investigated in face-to-face classes (Wilson & Ryan, 2013; Frisby & Martin, 2010) as well as online education (Picciano, 2002; Horspool & Lange, 2012; Glazier, 2016), as compared to emergency online learning (Selvanathan et al., 2020). While these studies generally mark both online education and emergency online learning with less interaction than face-to-face classes due to their barriers, they do not provide much more detailed information beyond this such as what these barriers are or how the students feel in this regard. Furthermore, they mainly do not distinguish between the quantity and quality of interaction which will be discussed later, appear to be two completely distinct features.

Hence, considering the literature gaps, this study was conducted to provide further insights into students' experiences regarding emergency online learning to provide more understanding of the nature of the challenges faced by them.

1.1.2. Metaphor analysis

A metaphor is a figure of speech used to understand and describe one concept or thing in terms of another. In doing so, metaphor finds a common ground between the two things or concepts that are quite unrelated otherwise. As Ortony (1975) maintains, a metaphor is composed of three elements: (1) tenor/topic (what is being described); (2) vehicle (what is being used metaphorically to form the basis of the comparison); and (3) the ground (what the two things have in common). For instance, in the metaphor '*emergency online learning is like mountain climbing with bare feet because it is extremely difficult*', there are two concepts: 'emergency online learning' and 'mountain climbing with bare feet', which are two completely unrelated concepts except for their common ground that is 'extreme difficulty'. In this comparison, therefore, emergency online learning is a 'tenor/topic'; mountain climbing with bare feet is a 'vehicle'; and difficulty is 'the ground'.

For many years, metaphor was only considered a characteristic of language, whose usage was limited to either a poetic device or a rhetorical device, until Lakoff and Johnson (1980) published their book 'Metaphors We Live By' to change this perception. Proposing a theory of metaphor called 'Conceptual Metaphor Theory' (CMT), they assert that metaphor is not only a matter of language but also a matter of thought and action: "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (p. 3). CMT is based on two arguments: (a) our conceptual system, which contains our knowledge about the world, is built on metaphor, and (b) our conceptual system, which we are mainly unaware of, governs our thoughts and actions. Hence, studying metaphor provides awareness of how we perceive a concept, and how this perception controls our thoughts and motivates our actions. For instance, if emergency online learning is perceived by a student as mountain climbing with bare feet, which is an extremely difficult task, we would understand the extent of the student's difficulties and challenges and therefore their unwillingness to use the online mode of learning.

The use of metaphor in research since the introduction of CMT has provided invaluable insights for researchers to understand people's perceptions and behaviors regarding various topics, one of which is students' perceptions regarding various aspects of learning and teaching. In investigating metaphors, there are generally two main approaches: (i) referring to metaphors produced in uncontrolled contexts, or (ii) eliciting metaphors from participants in controlled contexts. While the former is more suitable for analyzing data such as political discourse (Moragas-Fernández et al., 2018), or long texts such as journal articles (Jenson et al., 2021), the latter is more suitable for studying a group of participants' perceptions regarding a topic. From among various metaphor elicitation techniques, the use of a semi-structured prompt in the form of a sentence such as *"A is like … because …"* (when A is the topic of the study) is a common approach in investigating students or teachers' perceptions (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Fang, 2015; Koc, 2013; Koseoglu & Pehlivan, 2018; Wan et al., 2011). For instance, Koc (2013) investigated student teachers' conceptions of technology by employing the prompt "*Technology is like …because ...*", and Koseoglu & Pehlivan (2018), using the prompt *"Biology/the biology teacher is similar to/the same as… because…"*, studied high school students' metaphorical perceptions of biology and biology teacher.

1.2. Purpose of study

Considering the gaps in the literature regarding emergency online learning and the significant role of metaphor in revealing participants' perceptions and feelings, this study aimed to answer the following research question: How do the students feel about and perceive their experience of emergency online learning and its challenges by using metaphorical images?

2. Methods and materials

2.1. Participants

This study was conducted at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia during the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021. The participants of the study were all undergraduate students studying at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. Altogether 57 participants took part in this study who were coded as "P1, …, P57". 38 students (66.7%) were females, and 19 students (33.3%) were males. All the students were Malaysian and came from various states in Malaysia with different ethnic backgrounds 25 Malay students (43.9%), 21 Chinese students (36.8%), and 11 Indian students (19.3%). According to a survey conducted by the faculty at the beginning of each semester, only 3 students (5%) belonged to low-income families; however, all the participating students had announced they had access to a decent digital electronic device (a computer, a laptop, or a smartphone) as well as either a high-speed or rather high-speed and stable internet connection.

2.2. Data collection instrument

While the use of the prompt sentence '*A is like … because …*', in the form of a survey, is an effective way to elicit metaphors to study participants' perceptions (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Fang, 2015; Koc, 2013; Koseoglu & Pehlivan, 2018; Wan, Low & Li, 2011), there are two limitations to this approach: (i) one sentence may not provide in-depth insights; and (ii) part of the data is usually excluded for being faulty or unacceptable (e.g., Koc, 2013; Wan, Low & Li, 2011). Hence, while this approach was selected for this study, it was conducted in the form of an interview to provide more in-depth information and fewer faulty replies. Hence, the data collection instrument in this study was a semi-structured interview with the theme of "*emergency online learning is like … because …*". This frame provides the three elements of metaphor for analysis: tenor, vehicle, and ground (Ortony, 1975).

2.3. Ethics and procedure

Before the interview, the participants were familiarized with the concept of metaphor, were informed of the nature of the study, and had expressed their consent to participate in the study. Then, the participants are required to start the interview by answering this initial prompt. During the interview, the participants were asked detailed questions about the initial prompt to provide as much specific and explanatory information as possible. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Each interview transcription was saved as a separate Microsoft Word Document named P1 to P57.

2.4. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitative data analysis in this study was an adaptation of Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis with the following levels: (1) Familiarization; (2) coding; (3) generating themes; (4) reviewing themes and generating a thematic map; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) choosing extracts and producing the report. Data analysis was conducted with the assistance of another scholar to reduce the subjectivity of data analysis and to assure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. In this regard, the researcher and his colleague discussed their differences until they reached an agreement of 100%.

It should be noted again that this study was a metaphor analysis of the participants' replies regarding emergency online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic following the definition of metaphor as a figure of speech used to understand and describe one concept or thing in terms of

another. Thus, level 2 of analysis (coding) included looking for and coding metaphors that were *specifically* about emergency online learning or a feature of it and had all the three elements mentioned by Ortony (1975), i.e., (i) tenor/topic (what is being asserted); (ii) vehicle (what is being used metaphorically to form the basis of the comparison); and (iii) the ground (what the two things have in common). It should be noted that sometimes during the interview the participants made metaphors such as '*COVID-19 is a chain*' referring to topics other than 'emergency online learning', which were excluded from the analysis. Identification of relevant conceptual metaphors was quite straightforward in this study as the initial prompt '*Emergency online learning is like … because…*' directly elicited conceptual metaphors. Hence it was not necessary to take extra steps to identify conceptual metaphors as offered in other studies (Jenson et al., 2021).

Then the codes were collated into potential themes – conceptual categories that represented a feature assigned to emergency online learning – that were reviewed to check if they worked about the coded extracts and the entire data generating an initial thematic 'map' of the analysis. Then, the themes were finalized (modified, defined, named, and confirmed), and the findings were tabulated. Furthermore, during data analysis, the researcher and his co-rater noticed that for each theme, a change brought about by emergency online learning could be identified as its 'underlying cause'. Hence, another column was added to the table. In the end, based on the tabulated data, the final version of the thematic map of analysis was generated (Figure 2).

Table 1 presents a sample of the participants' replies and their respective conceptual metaphors, metaphor entailments, themes, and their underlying causes.

Table 1

A sample of participants' replies subject to data analysis

Participant	Language Samples (*coded sections*)	Conceptual metaphors	Metaphor entailments	Themes	Underlying causes (changes brought about by emergency online learning)
P2	Emergency online learning is like a mountain while traditional learning is like a lowland. Even though both paths are also connected to the land of knowledge, walking on the lowlands is more pleasant than climbing the mountain because mountain climbing needs *much more hard work. For example, doing a simple assignment now takes too many things to learn, and naturally much more commitment.*	Emergency online learning is a mountain	1. Doing assignments requires learning new skills. 2. Learning new skills requires more hard work. 3. more workload leads to more commitment.	More workload More Commitment	Change in doing assignments (doing assignments needs new skills)
P14	Emergency online learning is like a journey because we have the same destination which is the city of knowledge, but in this journey, *nobody collaborates… last semester, only two of us had to carry all of the load for the group*	Emergency online learning is a journey	1. There is a lack of collaboration in group work 2. There is more load of assignments for everyone	More workload Lack of rapport	Change in doing assignments (group work is more difficult now, load of work in doing assignments has increased)

	assignment besides *our load of assignments. You know online learning is more work for all…* In the old days, *it was nice to meet group members and discuss. Groupwork was fun.* Now, it is hard to chase someone. They always bring excuses…		3. Emergency online learning lacks enjoyable interaction with peers.		Change in interaction (emergency online learning lacks fun interaction with peers)
P19	The image of emergency online learning is a wall. You can hear the lecturer and friends, *but you cannot see their reactions, body language, and facial expressions, so there are times you are not sure what you hear during the lectures means what…* Sometimes*, I like to break the wall and go to the other side to feel their presence, their kindness, their friendliness. But online is not like that.…. The feel from face-to-face classes is lacking…. The aura in face-to-face class was different.*	Emergency online learning is a wall	1. Following the lectures is sometimes difficult due to a lack of non-verbal communication cues 2. Emergency online learning lacks personal connection 3. Participant sometimes feels lonely	Confusion Lack of rapport	Change in interaction (online interaction lacks non-verbal communication cues and personal connection)
P28	Emergency online learning is like a city, but in this city, there is no police…. Previously, *our lecturers were present in the class and could see everyone in the class, and nobody dared to cheat in the exams…but now many cheat and get equal marks as me…*	Emergency online learning is a city	1. The lecturer has a less controlling role in ensuring the fairness of the exam 2. Some students cheat in online exams and get equal marks as others	Unfair assessment	Change in lecturer's role (lecturer has a less controlling role)

As can be seen in Table 1, if one metaphor could be categorized under more than one theme (conceptual category), all were considered. For instance, the metaphor "emergency online learning is like a mountain … needs much *more hard work*. For example, doing a simple assignment now takes too many things to learn, and naturally much *more commitment*" (P2) was categorized under (i) more commitment; and (ii) more workload, as both features were expressed in a single metaphor. In other words, this shows the interrelationship between the two themes: 'more work' requires 'more commitment'.

Finally, for the quantitative analysis stage, frequencies and percentages of the metaphorical images and their respective themes as well as the co-occurrence of each two theme (by using MAXQDA Pro 2022 Software-Code Co-occurrence Model) were calculated and tabulated to summarize the data (see Table 2 and 3, and Figure 1).

3. Results

The findings did not show any significant distinction across different ethnic groups or genders. Altogether, the 57 students, who took part in the study, produced 29 distinct metaphors about emergency online learning. Table 2 illustrates these distinct metaphors produced by the participants and their frequencies.

Table 2

Frequency of metaphors

No.	Emergency online learning is like …	Frequency
1	A mountain	6
2	A war	6
3	A journey	6
4	A wall	5
5	An ocean	4
6	A city	3
7	A building	3
8	A game	2
9	The sky	2
10	A tornado	1
11	An avalanche	1
12	A thunderstorm	1
13	A flood	1
14	Practicing for the Olympics	1
15	A Marathon	1
16	Meditation	1
17	A superfast train	1
18	A lonely boat in the ocean	1
19	A river	1
20	A sea breeze	1
21	A wooden fence	1
22	A dream	1
23	A jungle	1
24	A blurry picture	1
25	A desert	1
26	A dark hole	1
27	A blind man	1
28	Dieting	1
29	A haze	1
		57

From these 57 participants, 22 participants (38.6%) expressed both satisfaction with some features of emergency online learning and dissatisfaction with some other features, while 35 participants (61.4%) mainly remained dissatisfied, which is significantly high considering the implication of emergency online learning in almost all higher education institutions in Malaysia and all over the world. This seems to be in line with the previous studies reporting dissatisfaction among the majority of students (Chung et al., 2020; Moy & Ng, 2021; Selvanathan et al., 2020).

For those 22 participants (38.6%) who expressed partial satisfaction with emergency online learning, the positive aspects for them included 'more freedom, more flexibility, and more variety'. This partial satisfaction has been reported in other studies too. For instance, Horspool & Lange (2012) in their survey regarding the effectiveness of 'online education' found that while flexibility motivated students to choose online education, limited peer-to-peer communication was a reported source of dissatisfaction among them.

In this study, besides the three themes representing positive features of 'more freedom, more flexibility, and more variety' reported by the 22 participants, five other themes representing

emergency online learning 'challenges' were identified across *all* participants: (1) more commitment; (2) more workload; (3) lack of rapport; (4) confusion; and (5) unfair assessment, which will be discussed further as the focus of this study. Table 3 presents the themes across the metaphors and their frequencies.

Table 3

Identified themes across the metaphors and their frequencies

No.	Themes	f (%)	Metaphors (f)
1	More Commitment	16 (11.7)	a mountain (4); a war (6); a journey (1); a city (1); a flood (1); practicing for the Olympics (1); a marathon (1); dieting (1)
2	More workload	27 (19.7)	a mountain (5); a war (2); a journey (3); an ocean (4); a city (1); a building (3); a tornado (1); an avalanche (1); a thunderstorm (1); a flood (1); practicing for the Olympics (1); a marathon (1); meditation (1); a superfast train (1); a river (1)
3	Lack of rapport	32 (23.3)	a mountain (1); a journey (3); a wall (5); an ocean (2); a city (1); a building (3); a game (1); the sky (2); a tornado (1); an avalanche (1); a thunderstorm (1); meditation (1); a lonely boat (1); a sea breeze (1); a wooden fence (1); a dream (1); a jungle (1); a blurry picture (1); a desert (1); a dark hole (1); a blind man (1); a haze (1)
4	Confusion	19 (13.9)	a mountain (1); a journey (2); a wall (5); a city (1); a building (1); the sky (1); a tornado (1); a wooden fence (1); a dream (1); a jungle (1); a blurry picture (1); a desert (1); a dark hole (1); a blind man (1)
5	Unfair assessment	9 (6.6)	a mountain (1); a journey (1); an ocean (2); a city (1); a game (2); an avalanche (1); a thunderstorm (1)
6	More freedom	11 (8)	a journey (3); a city (2); a game (2); the sky (1); practicing for the Olympics (1); a lonely boat (1); a sea breeze (1)
7	More flexibility	13 (9.5)	a journey (3); a city (2); a building (2); a game (2); practicing for the Olympics (1); a lonely boat (1); a river (1); a sea breeze (1)
8	More Variety	10 (7.3)	a mountain (1); a war (4); a journey (1); an ocean (2); a city (1); a river (1)
-	-	137 (100)	-

As Table 3 illustrates, even though the students used a wide range of metaphors, they seemed to be quite selective in choosing the metaphors. For instance, metaphors of natural disasters (e.g., flood, avalanche, thunderstorm, and tornado) which represent helplessness and hopelessness were used to represent the load of work, metaphors of war which represent the struggle to survive referred to the overlap of commitment between family life, and studying, or metaphors such as a wall were used to represent loneliness and feeling disconnected.

Furthermore, as can be seen in Table 3, the most frequent challenge was 'lack of rapport' (23.3 %) which in this study included the elements of "lack of 'personal connection' and 'enjoyable interaction' with peers and lecturers", closely followed by 'more workload' (19.7%) which in this study included "assignments, class projects, and all other tasks that needed to be done by students such as checking online sources for further reading as well as learning new skills to do the class assignments".

Finally, as discussed before, each metaphor could be assigned to more than one theme implying interrelationship among the themes. In this regard, significant patterns were identified in terms of co-occurrence of the themes. For instance, 'more commitment' altogether was mentioned 16 times, out of which 11 cases co-occurred with 'more workload'. Similarly, 'lack of rapport' and 'confusion' were respectively mentioned 32 and 19 times, out of which they co-occurred 18 times in

the same metaphors. Figure 1 illustrates the co-occurrence of the themes which was achieved by using the MAXQDA Pro 2022 Software-Code Co-occurrence Model.

Figure 1
Co-occurrence of the themes by MAXQDA Pro 2022 Software-Code Co-occurrence Model

Code Co-occurrence Model (Code Occurrence)
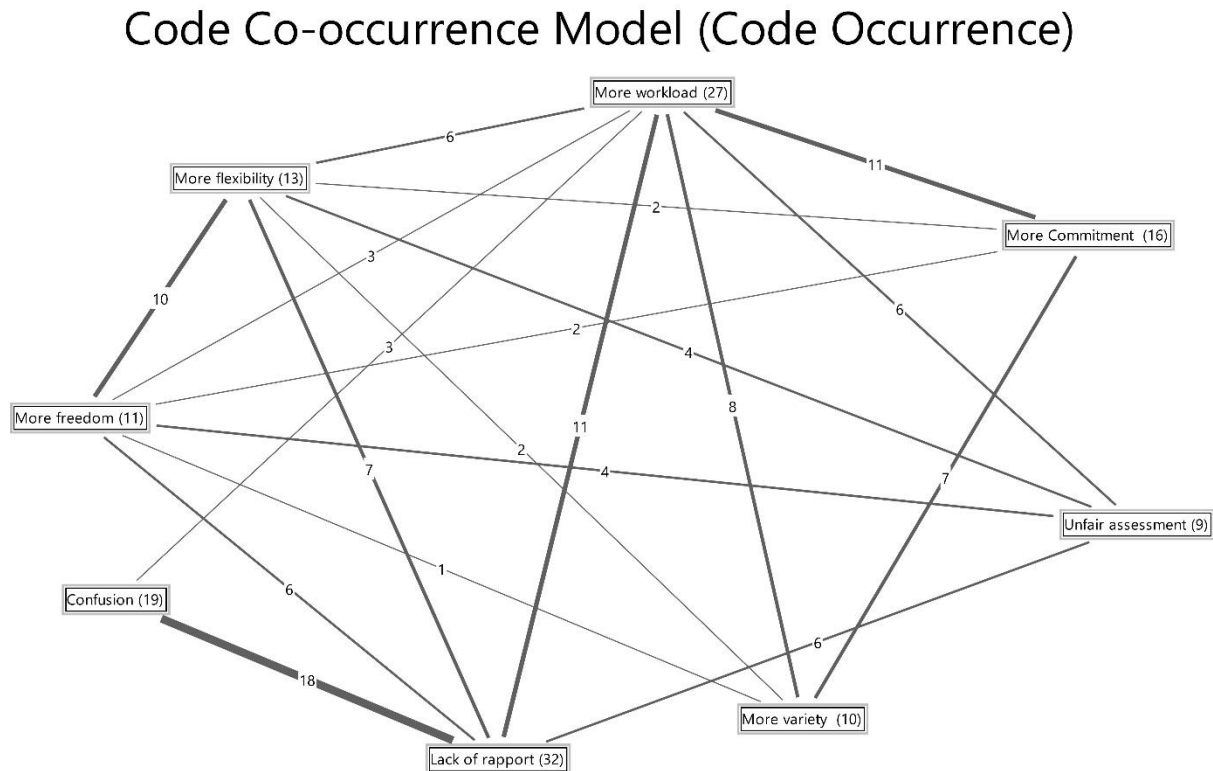
As Figure 1 shows, there seems to be a meaningful relationship between the themes. For instance, noticeable co-occurrence between 'more workload' and 'more commitment' reveals that they are connected and interrelated. Analysis of the participants' replies, like "…needs much *more hard work*… and naturally much *more commitment*" (P2) also confirms this relationship. As another instance, the co-occurrence between 'more variety' (which was considered a positive aspect) and 'more workload' (which is a negative aspect) shows the existence of a relationship between them. In other words, 'more variety', even though attractive, does not seem to provide a good motivation for the students to choose online learning as 'more variety' could also mean 'more things to learn' and thus 'more workload', like "emergency online learning is like an ocean *with many different types of fish[es] in it*…it is mesmerized [mesmerizing]… But I feel like I am on a boat and to get [to the] shore I *need days and months rowing*" (P26).

4. Discussion

In this section, the five themes representing the five emergency online learning challenges will be discussed concerning a few extracts from the participants' replies.

Sixteen (16) students (11.7% of the participants) perceived emergency online learning as 'more commitment' such as 'self-discipline, self-control, consistency, and full-time dedication'. Further analyses revealed that one reason was the new learning environment. While the literature successfully proves that students' perceptions regarding the learning environment play an important role in their learning process (Shresta et al., 2019; Said et al., 2009), and even though some studies have assigned studying at home with 'distraction' (Dost et al., 2020), the literature does not provide further in-depth insights into the nature of studying at home. However, the employed metaphors reflected activities that require a strong commitment to be accomplished such as 'dieting, practicing for the Olympics, and marathon' to conceptualize the strong force of temptation to avoid studying at

home, lack of proper planning, and the required high levels of 'self-discipline, self-control, and consistency'.

The second issue that attributed 'more commitment' to studying at home was the overlapping and interference of emergency online learning with family life. According to some of the students, previously there used to be a borderline between family life and studying when they lived on the campus and far from their families. However, now this borderline seems to have faded away. For instance, one of the participants reported:

"Emergency online learning is like a war over the border. Previously family life and studying used to be separate. Now, *there is no borderline between family life and online learning, between homework and housework, between family gatherings and class meetings. While I am with my family I am thinking about online classes, and while I am in online classes, I am thinking about family matters*" (P8).

One of the reasons for this issue seems to be the 'accessibility' of lecturers and students, which is due to the 'flexibility'. While 'flexibility' can be a positive feature of emergency online learning, it seems to have caused "*untimely notifications and messages*" causing the students to be always on the alert, as one of the students stated:

"Emergency online learning is like a war because you stay ready *all the time* even at the weekends not to miss any info. *Online means always being accessible*. When you are at home, you are supposed to help but I always need to check my messages, emails, and so on… we are always on the alert for *untimely notifications and messages, even at the dinner table*…" (P10).

This seems to be due to the overlapping of two distinctive roles that the students play at home and in the class. In other words, these two roles have overlapped each other as the learning environment and living environment have merged into one. For instance, one of the students from a rural area stated that he had to help with the housework and taking care of younger siblings now that he was back home, the responsibilities which he was free from when he was on campus. This challenge even increased for him when he had to miss classes to take his father to the hospital for COVID-19.

From this perspective, emergency online learning was most frequently conceptualized by the 'war' metaphor. This reflects the anxiety among the students and their struggle to meet the requirements of emergency online learning in a new learning environment and at the same time to create a balance between learning and family life (Bringula et al., 2021). War metaphor suggests a struggle for survival. Losing a war is generally attributed to serious consequences. Fighting a war requires full participation and full-time alertness which can be exhaustive and attritional in the long term. Hence, the desperate tone and the pressure on the students is easily identifiable in these metaphors.

Another challenge of emergency online learning conceptualized in students' metaphors was the increased workload. 27 participants (19.7%) referred to the demanding nature of emergency online learning requiring too much effort due to two factors: (a) change in assignments, and (b) the broadness of information as well as the speed of delivery of information in online classes. While online assignments have been reported as one of the primary sources of students' dissatisfaction (Mahyoob, 2021; Nazilah et al., 2021), investigating the influence of 'broadness and fast delivery of the information in online classes' on students' perception seems to have been a missing loop in the literature.

In terms of workload, two types of metaphors were used. The first group of metaphors was related to natural disasters such as 'floods, avalanches, thunderstorms, and tornados', whose main characteristics are being too fast, uncontrollable, and destructive. For instance, catching up with learning and doing homework and assignments was so difficult that one of the participants eventually gave up his efforts:

"Emergency online learning is like I am buried under an avalanche because I am buried under *tons of information, homework, assignments, and so on.* I must *work full time* to catch up but *no matter how hard I try; I cannot get out*" (P39)*.*

One reason for this workload among others was the fact that doing online assignments required learning new skills, which was considered a burden besides learning the subject matters, like "… needs *much more hard work*. For example, doing a simple assignment now *takes too many things to learn*…" (P2).

The second group of metaphors were mainly 'mountain, and ocean' which are the symbols of grandeur, broadness, and vastness. However, here, they entailed a large amount of information and assignments in online classes. In this regard, dealing with emergency online learning was conceptualized as 'being immersed' in an ocean (P24), or 'running up' a mountain (P4), both of which left the students "*breathless".*

Based on the analysis of the students' replies and the previous literature, it seems that the first impression of online learning in the students' minds is far from reality. In this regard, online learning was initially considered to be 'time-saving' merely based on the belief that one can save time only by saving the travel time to and from the class, like "…*previously* we thought online learning is much more fun and timesaving" (P4). However, it appears that, in practice, online learning is much more demanding and requires more time doing homework and learning, which can even exceed the travel time it was supposed to save. The same misconception has been reported in the literature (Horspool & Lange, 2012).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, many scholars have discussed the necessity of 'preparation' before launching online classes by providing appropriate infrastructure such as a stable internet connection (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). However, what seems to be missing is students' mental preparation (i.e., what students should expect from online learning). Online learning, in general, is flexible, but it does not necessarily mean it is less demanding and easier than face-to-face classes. Online learning is generally known for saving travel time to and from the classes; however, again it does not necessarily mean the students are required to spend less time on the process of learning (Sason et al., 2022). This misconception seems to be one of the reasons for dissatisfaction when the students join the courses and are faced with the reality of online learning.

The third and the fourth challenges of emergency online learning were 'lack of rapport' and 'confusion'. 'Rapport', in this study, refers to the 'overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond' with the two features of 'personal connection' and 'enjoyable interaction' (Frisby & Martin, 2010). 'Confusion' in this study is defined as 'lack of following or understanding lectures, lack of following or understanding lecturer's instructions as well as not knowing how exactly to do assignments. Although 'lack of rapport' and 'confusion' are two separate themes, both were presented and discussed under the same heading as they usually occurred together in the same metaphors (ref. Figure 1). Further analysis of the metaphors revealed that they were both caused by the same source: the 'limitation of online interaction'. Thus, their discussion under the same heading would be more relevant.

The limitation of online interaction does not refer to the 'accessibility', which even seems to have been increased in online classes as reported by the participants such as "online means always be accessible" (P10). However, the analysis of students' replies revealed that it is the 'quality' of online interaction that the students found limited as compared to face-to-face interaction causing both 'lack of rapport' and 'confusion'. Online interaction was found to be limited in establishing 'rapport' with peers and lecturers according to students, "… sometimes, I like to break the wall and go to the other side to *feel their presence, their kindness, their friendliness*. But online is not like that….." (P19). Furthermore, online interaction was found limited in conveying information and knowledge clearly and effectively to the students due to its lack of non-verbal communication cues, like: "… but you cannot *see their reactions, body language, and their facial expressions,* so there are times you are *not*

sure what you hear during the lectures means what" (P19). While online classes did not provide an effective platform to convey information and knowledge to the students, the students were not willing to ask for help from their lecturers and peers due to a 'lack of rapport'. Thus, the students showed a combined feeling of confusion and loneliness [lack of rapport] such as "I am sometimes too *confused* which direction to go… and *no one around to rely on, no one to hold my hand*" (P38).

The findings of the present study show that while the quantity of interaction seems to have increased in online classes as compared to face-to-face classes, which is due to the increased accessibility of peers and lecturers in online learning, the quality of interaction appears to be much more limited than face-to-face classes. As a result, it seems that online learning has led to more individualistic rather than communicative and interactive learning. Such a distinction between the quality and the quantity of online interaction seems to have been somewhat ignored in the literature both before the pandemic (Picciano, 2002) and during the pandemic (Selvanathan et al., 2020). However, quality and quantity do appear to be two distinct features of online learning causing different challenges for the students: the former by being decreased and the latter by being increased.

The fifth challenge of emergency online learning mentioned by 9 participants (4.6%) was unfair assessment, which according to students' replies refers to a 'lack of fair collaboration for group assignments and cheating in exams.

In terms of lack of fair collaboration in group work, there seem to be three main reasons according to the participants' replies: (1) increased workload as one of the reasons for evading groupwork by some members and causing dissatisfaction among the other members; (2) lack of rapport with their peers, which has turned a once fun activity into a bitter experience, and as discussed in the previous section, has led to more individualistic rather than communicative and interactive learning: and (3) lack of lecturer's control in online classes.

Metaphors such as 'journey, building, and game' were used to conceptualize group activities, in which active cooperation of all group members is vital in achieving the common goal/destination. Hence, if one member is not cooperative, either the other group members will have to carry the extra burden making it unfair, or the whole group will suffer the consequences such as receiving low marks. Hence, they had no other choice but to compromise. For instance, the feeling of desperation and compromise is observed in this extract: "… and I think it is not fair that we do all the work and others enjoy the results, but *how can Dr. control everybody, so we just keep quiet*" (P35).

Hence, as the above and other replies imply, besides more workload and lack of rapport as the two reasons for reducing group work, another factor influencing group work was the lack of lecturer's control in online classes. Even though the students did not consider it as their lecturer's fault (e.g., "but how can Dr. control everybody" –P35), the lack of lecturer's control, which is the result of lack of physical presence, seems to have contributed to this issue. Many studies show that the lecturer/teacher's authoritative role as the leader and the guide is highly expected and perceived by the students as one of the requirements in the class (Koseoglu & Pehlivan, 2018; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Wan et al., 2011). For instance, Wan et al., (2011) studied English teachers and their students' metaphorical perceptions regarding the role of English teachers. They found that the students saw the teacher as 'an authority', while the teachers saw themselves as 'co-workers'. In online classes, on the one hand, the lecturer's authoritative and controlling role is naturally reduced. This has given the students more freedom and control in the class (e.g., in deciding on their own pace of learning or attending the classes) which was considered as a positive feature of online learning by some of the participants. However, this change of role has also brought about dissatisfaction. Some other studies have also highlighted the challenges and limitations of online exams. For instance, Maraqa et al., (2022) in a survey found out that one of the challenges for the students was online exams, especially controlling the exams. Similarly, the participants of the present study referred to controlling the exams as one of the main challenges of online learning. Furthermore, they assigned this challenge to the lack of a lecturer's physical presence. The employed metaphors in this regard
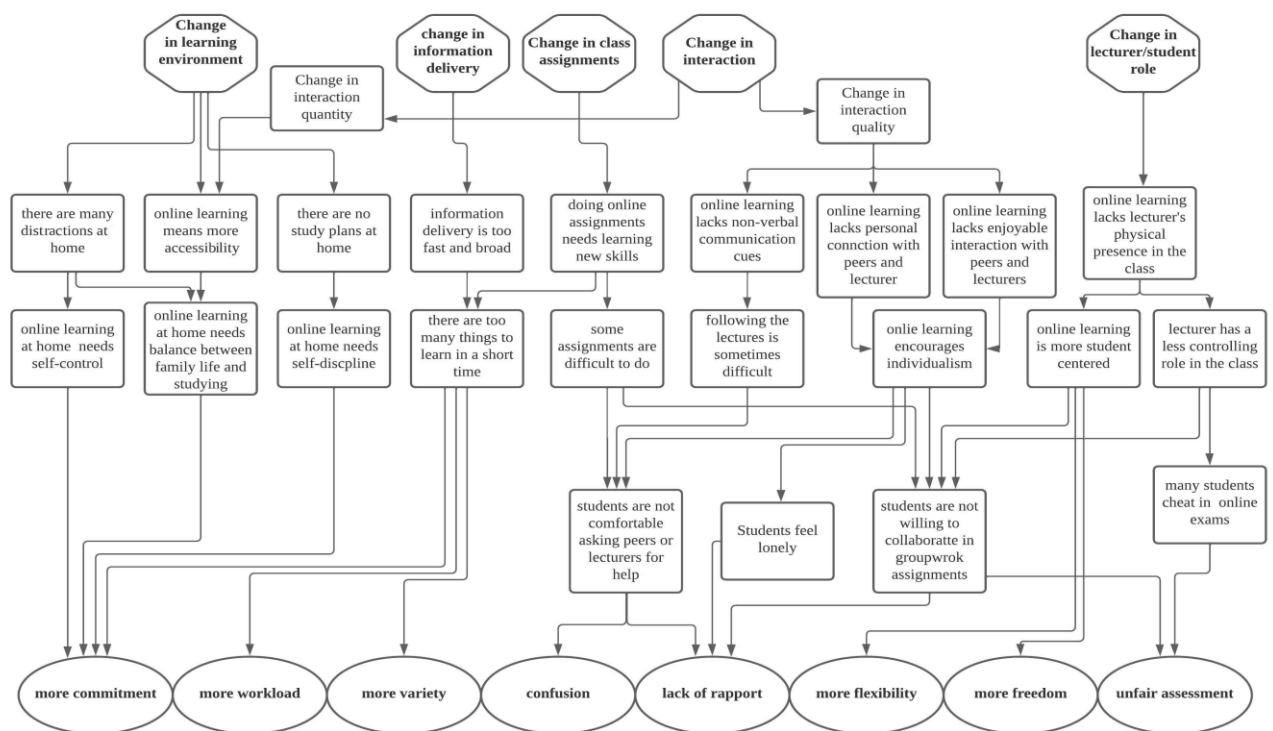
were directly related to the lecturer's authoritative and controlling role as a necessary factor in the class, lack of which would result in chaos and cheating; thus, those students who followed the rules saw no points in observing the rules, like "online learning is like a city, but in this city, there is no police…. Previously, our lecturers were present in the class and could see everyone in the class, and nobody dared to cheat in the exams…but now many cheat and get quality marks like me…" (P28). Presently there have been studies on how technology could be structured to deliver and assess classes online with a control on cheating (Khan et al., 2021; Zhang, 2023).

In sum, it can be argued that it is the lecturer's new role that has not been accepted by the students. It does appear that, whether the students belong to the group that follows the rules, or they belong to the group that evades following the rules, the students still require a controlling force in the class to ensure the fairness of online assessments. Otherwise, the former group feels disappointed, and the latter group takes advantage of this opportunity, which reduces the effectiveness of online assessments.

While online group assignments and online examinations appear to be among the main challenges reported in some other studies (Nazilah et al., 2021; Mahyoob, 2021; Selvanathan et al., 2020), none of them have specifically investigated their fairness. For example, Nazilah et al., (2021) in a survey of 184 Malaysian university students reported students' lack of satisfaction for group assignments (60.3%) and online exams (55.3%). However, in their survey, 'doing group assignments' and 'taking an online test' were evaluated as a challenging tasks' and there was no mention of 'fairness'. A look at the literature reveals that 'fairness of assessments' has a significant influence on students' performance (Fuller, 2006; Murillo & Hidalgo, 2017). For instance, Fuller (2006) argues that "if tests and other assessments are fair and, more importantly, perceived as fair by students, then they serve as effective reinforcers of student learning". The findings of this study also reveal that lack of a fair assessment in online classes can reduce the effectiveness of the assessments.

Finally, Figure 2, the thematic map of the study, illustrates the features of online learning and their interrelationships based on the students' replies.

Figure 2

Thematic map of the analysis

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5. Conclusion

This study was a metaphor analysis of how a group of students in a Malaysian university conceptualized their experience of emergency online learning and its challenges. While the use of prompt '*A is like … because…*' is a common practice in the literature to elicit metaphors in surveys, this study employed it in the form of a semi-structured interview, which besides reducing participants' faulty responses – as reported in the conducted surveys – to zero, it also increased the researcher's control to illicit more in-depth information when necessary. Analyzing metaphorical images provided an in-depth understanding of how the participants felt about and perceived emergency online learning and revealed the reasons behind their unwillingness to accept it. Furthermore, the findings revealed interrelationships among the five main challenges of (1) more commitment, (2) more workload, (3) lack of rapport, (4) confusion, and (5) unfair assessment, and showed how these challenges were caused by five main changes brought about by online learning in terms of (1) the learning environment, (2) class assignments, (3) information delivery, (4) interaction, and (5) lecturer/student roles. Students' lack of preparation for these changes before joining the emergency online courses appears to be one of the sources of their dissatisfaction during the courses.

Hence, to address these challenges, the first suggestion is to prepare the students before joining their respective faculties so that they are fully aware of what is expected from them. One solution would be sharing previous students' viewpoints of emergency online learning while particularly reminding the new students that online learning does not necessarily mean less workload and less commitment. The second suggestion is consideration of the new learning environment, i.e., home, and its new features, forces, and limitations for those studying from home. One solution would be allowing the students to choose the class time based on their daily routines or advising them to provide a quiet place without being disturbed during the class. The third suggestion is the consideration of students' skills required to perform online learning tasks. One solution would be organizing workshops for the new students to learn the skills required for online classes. The fourth suggestion is to improve the quality of interaction. For instance, various socializing and rapport-building activities could be integrated into lesson plans rather than merely focusing on teaching, assignments, and quizzes. Fifth, wherever implementing more control during the final exams is not viable, perhaps the nature of final examinations can be changed to reduce the need for such control such as changing written exams to oral exams or asking each student detailed questions about their collaboration and their learning outcome in the groupwork assignments. Finally, considering the limitations of online interaction in group assignments, either fair focus can be put on individual assignments or a platform can be designed for controlled group assignments to ensure the participation of all members.

Even though the literature seems to be replete with studies dedicated to identifying and addressing emergency online learning features and challenges, as the findings of the study suggest, much more research is still required. For instance, while the findings of this study revealed the existence of complicated interrelationships among emergency online learning features, there is not enough research in this regard. Hence, more conceptual studies can be conducted in other settings to reveal the unknown aspects of online learning. For instance, while this study only focused on Malaysian students, some international students had concerns and challenges such as time differences or language barriers in communicating with local students in their group work activities. Furthermore, considering the sample size and the qualitative nature of this study and other similar studies, the findings of these studies can be tested across a larger population to check the correlation among the identified themes as well as the correlation between the identified themes and students' satisfaction.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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