Interpersonal Communication and the Effects of Online Communication between Professors and Students at the King Abdul Aziz University during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Distant education has become a new normal ever since the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world. Educational institutions around the world, including universities in Saudi Arabia such as the King Abdul Aziz University began to conduct classes virtually. However, the interpersonal communication between professors and the students began to get effected due to the communication established online. This paper verified this impact by interviewing the professors at the King Abdul Aziz University and found that despite of all the efforts which

the students and the professors put in, the distant learning was not effectively done and the interpersonal communication was negatively influenced.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned out to be one of the worst natural disasters in the world. Due to its extremely contagious and rapidly transmittable nature, COVID-19 virus spread rapidly around the world causing deaths of hundreds and thousands of people worldwide (Tanveer et al, 2020). Considering the consequences of this disease and the fact that it can only be prevented by maintaining social distance, governments of countries around the world chose to implement lockdown. Even until now, when people have been vaccinated and the situation is somewhat under control, distant learning is still in practice and universities in Saudi Arabia are no exception (Mabrook & Mabrook, 2020). Educational institutions across the country rely upon online communication in order to establish interpersonal communication between students and the professors (Rajab et al, 2020). On one hand, where distant learning and depending upon online communication is the most appropriate choice to make during the COVID-19 pandemic, there on the other hand, the fact that quality of

education is being compromised also tends to co-exist. In general, previous studies such as Onyema et al (2020); Ali et al (2021) have revealed that students as well as the faculty found it somewhat easy to conduct the class online with the ease of their homes but still, the disruptions caused in the connection, or not being able to help the students learn physically eventually caused dissatisfaction among both; students and teachers. However, these aspects are ought to be confirmed in this research paper in the context of King Abdul Aziz University, Saudi Arabia.

The aim of this research paper is to develop an understanding of the effectiveness of interpersonal communication and the effects of online communication between students and professors at the King Abdul Aziz University. The major emphasis will be on studying that if the use of online communication for delivering lectures and relaying education amidst the COVID-19 is desirable by the faculty members and the students at the mentioned university or not. The reason why King Abdul Aziz University has been specifically chosen as a subject is because it is one of the finest educational institutions in the country and therefore, it is interesting to find out how its professors manage to deliver the education to their students online. Thus, the research question which this paper will attempt to answer is to investigate the level of effectiveness of interpersonal as well as online communication

established between students and professors during the COVID-19
pandemic. The research paper will also examine the opportunities and
challenges of relying purely upon online communication to deliver and
receive the lecture and how it has impacted the interpersonal
communication of the teachers/professors and the students at the King
Abdul Aziz University. This research paper will later discuss the
methodology through which the mentioned objective will be achieved,
and will also state the expected contributions which the findings of this
paper will make to the existing literature as well as for the practitioners.

Methodology

The methodology set for this research paper included qualitative
techniques and primary methods. Interviews have been conducted with
the professors of King Abdul Aziz University in order to investigate
them about the effect of online communication and their interpersonal
communication with the students during the pandemic. Sample size is 3
professors only due to their availability issue amidst the pandemic. The
sampling technique used is convenience sampling. To make sure that
the data is collected purposefully from the mentioned respondents,
some other important methodological factors have also been taken into
account. These include using ethnography strategy, followed by
explanatory research design, and interpretivism philosophy. With

respect to approach, inductive reasoning is implemented because this research paper does not support formulation or testing of hypothesis. Moving further, the analysis of responses gathered during the interview has been done with the help of content analysis technique which assists in relevant and meaningful interpretation of the results and thus, attainment of clear outcomes becomes possible. It is also essential to mention that since this research paper followed empirical methods, ethical considerations are also followed. This comprised of practicing autonomy powers of the participants, maintaining confidentiality of their data as well as responses, respecting their choice of withdrawal, and keeping their identities anonymous.

Findings

To obtain the findings, analysis of the interviews had been conducted. The professors at the King Abdul Aziz University were presented with three questions each and were requested to share their honest opinions and experiences in the response. Thus, the first question was about their interpersonal communication with the students and how it was changed during the pandemic. The first professor responded, "*It is surely effected. Although I always ensure my students that I am just a call/ message away, but they hesitate to reach me out. They might feel that I would be busy and thus, it has created a gap in between.*" Another

professor shared, "*I had never thought of such times ever. The last time I remember I used to connect with my students online was for assignment submissions via emails. And now, things have changed entirely. I feel the interpersonal communication with the students has been adversely effected during the pandemic.*" The third respondent said, "*Well, I notice no big difference. I was available online for my students even before the pandemic. So, they are used to contact me virtually. And now that virtual communication has become a necessity, I think my students and I have an advantage in terms of having a strong interpersonal communication.*" The analysis of responses to the first question indicated that majority of the professors felt massive change in their interpersonal communication with the students because they were in practice of physical contact and were more comfortable in it.

The next question asked during the interview was about the opportunities and challenges which the professors deem they and their students feel experience in communicating online. From this perspective, the first interviewee reported, "*In terms of challenges, I have experienced that there comes a point when online communication doesn't suffice. My students and I are more comfortable in interacting physically and discuss the topics we need to study in the class. But now, what I hear is complaint(s) from students especially related to poor internet connection. The opportunity however is that I can be available*

for them anytime." In the views of another professor from the King Abdul Aziz University, "*The most highlighted challenge of online communication is that neither the students nor myself are able to communication uninterruptedly. There are always distractions. Secondly, there is never full strength available to attend the lecture as they could not establish online communication due to disturbance in connection. Nonetheless, the only opportunity, as I see it, is that we can contact at the ease of our homes especially nowadays when the COVID-19 pandemic is at peak.*" The third professor mentioned, "*The opportunity is that my students and I can contact each other from anywhere and above all, we try to stay safe. However, the challenge is that not all the lectures can be delivered online. For instance, practical knowledge requires practical demonstration which cannot be done via online communication. So, yes, there are pros and cons both.*"

In response to the last question, one of the professors replied, "*Online communication is good to some extent only. If you feel that it will continue to help in the long run without effecting the education of students, I am afraid you are mistaken. I think there is dire need to think of ways to reunite with the students while not compromising on our safety.*" The second professor who was interviewed for this study responded, "*The effective of online communication is definitely significant. It helped in making sure that the students must continue to*

learn. However, I noticed that neither the students nor I are contended by studying through online channels and establishing communication in the long run. I deem that there has to be a way out." The third and the last respondent of the study asserted, "*I am very certain about my opinion that despite of all the usefulness it exhibits, online communication cannot be effective enough for teaching the King Abdul Aziz University in the long run.*" The analysis of these interview responses depicted that the professors and as per their experience, their students at the King Abdul Aziz University acknowledge the usefulness of online communication but could not consider as a regular and long-term mode of delivering education to the students. The professors revealed that not all the material could be taught by communicating online' especially if the subject matter is practical and experiment-based. Thus, the findings confirmed that online communication and interpersonal communication are important amidst the pandemic but cannot be considered as a permanent option.

Research Contribution(s)

The paper under study has some considerable contributions to make. Precisely, it is anticipated that this research paper will be of notable use from theoretical as well as practical point of view. From theoretical standpoint, the findings of this research are anticipated to help the

researchers and academicians in future to understand and learn how challenging or opportunity-bearing it is to deliver lecture online and how the interpersonal communication performed via online channels effects the interaction between university students and professors. The future researchers may consider this research paper as their base study to further explore how the overall studies have been affected amidst the COVID-19 outbreak. The researchers in the future will have the opportunity to determine aspects other than online communication and interpersonal communication in order to know what opportunities or complications the professors and students at the King Abdul Aziz University or any other university in the country (or even abroad) have been experiencing due to the pandemic.

On the other hand, the practical contributions of this research paper are also expected to be noteworthy. It will be of great assistance for the professors and mainly for the management of the King Abdul Aziz University to comprehend the effects of online communication along with determining how the interpersonal communication between students and professors can be facilitated amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from this, the practical contributions will also be for the policy makers who will get the chance to learn about how the education of students is being effected due to prolonged online communication between professors and the students. It is further

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believed that these contributions will not be restricted to the King
Abdul Aziz University only; instead, other universities in Saudi Arabia
and even across the globe will also be able to avail the benefits of this
study.

Conclusion

This research paper concludes that the interpersonal communication
between students and professors at the King Abdul Aziz University
could not be performed effectively. The qualitative testing and analysis
of the interviews revealed that delivering lecture online was difficult
because of the disruptions caused in the internet connection. This
sometimes tended to occur at professors' end, while at other instances,
students reported a weak internet connection. It was found that besides
this disruption, the students often complained about not being able to
understand the lecture and instruction given by the professors.
However, when inquired about the challenges or opportunities which
the professors seem the online communication might have brought, the
response was that amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, online lectures and
virtually held interpersonal communication was the best option to
consider for ensuring everyone's safety. Findings also suggested that
the effects of online communication were negative and therefore, they
hoped for the pandemic situation to get better. Furthermore, the

research paper also shed light upon the theoretical and practical contributions made via this article; that is, it would expectedly enable the management of universities (particularly the King Abdul Aziz University) to ponder upon the causes which impact the online communication and thus, take necessary measures for improvements.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How do you think your interpersonal communication with the students has changed amidst the pandemic?

2. What challenges and opportunities do you feel online communication has brought in terms of educating the students at the King Abdul Aziz University during the pandemic?

3. Do you think online communication will be able to deliver significant outcomes in terms of teaching the students at the King Abdul Aziz University in the long run? If not, why?

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