VIRTUAL EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EXPERIENCES OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDENTS IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

The world responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by implementing policies and measures such as social and physical distancing to curb the spread of the coronavirus. These policies and measures have however impacted the learning experiences of millions of domestic and international students. Universities changed their teaching and learning methods from physical to virtual presence following national, international, and World Health Organization (WHO) mandates. However, these rapid shifts had a tangible impact on the quality of education as well as on students and teachers. Using the snowball sampling technique, this study thus seeks to examine the experiences and challenges (distance education, learning experiences, social life, etc.) faced by Southeast Asian students studying in Turkish universities. Through interviews conducted between May and June 2021, this research found that these students felt lonely and anxious during the pandemic, which had an impact on their academic performance. As a result of their immigration status, they were unable to adequately deal with distance education and saw it as ineffectual, unproductive, and a waste of time. This research has implications for policymakers and stakeholders, as well as for both receiving and sending countries.

Keywords: COVID-19, social distancing, distance education, Southeast Asian students, university, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

The spread of COVID-19 took a significant turn in mid-2020. It spared no country, regardless of its level of development in terms of growth and technological innovation. COVID-19 was labelled a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020). Along with the severe effects on the worldwide economy (Dhawan 2020: 6), the pandemic also wreaked havoc on the global education sector due to a variety of restrictions (Wangdi et al. 2021: 1; Sia and Adamu 2021; Tadesse and Muluye 2020: 159). As a strategy to combat COVID-19, many governments closed educational institutions, causing more than 1.2 billion pupils in 186 countries to miss class (Li and Lalani 2020). As a result, countries across the world turned to distance learning, in which students and educators participate in the teaching process remotely via digital platforms in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (United Nations 2020).

However, distance learning is not a new development. The processes of globalisation in recent decades have also encouraged the increase in overseas student numbers worldwide. Europe and North America, for example, has pioneered online education to accommodate students from many cultures and countries (Weiss and Ford 2011: 229; Moore et al. 2005: 187). Used interchangeably with other terms such as online learning, digital learning, e-learning, and virtual learning (Kireev et al. 2019: 387; Traxler 2018: 1–2), distance education is known as a form of transnational education (Ziguras 2001: 8) or international education (Bista 2015: 39). Contrasted to campus education, which takes place on university campuses, distance learning not only provides greater flexibility (Bozkurt 2019: 259; Ghosh et al. 2012: 53; Jung et al. 2011: 63; Drouin and Vartanian 2010: 147) but also has the ability to reach a bigger audience (Bista 2015: 54; Iyengar et al. 2014: 103). Nevertheless, studies have shown it is difficult to keep pupils motivated in this relatively new method of teaching-learning (Jamtsho et al. 2010: 40). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere that were not previously involved in remote education have been pressured to turn to distance learning (Bandalaria and Figueroav 2018; Ministry of Education Singapore 2018; Puttapithakporn 2018; Ali 2008: 1–6; Raza 2008: 483; Jung and Latchem 2007: 235), which has now become a requirement.

Like the rest of the world, Turkey too implemented restrictions in order to flatten the curve of COVID-19 (with a Stringency Index of 90 or higher) (Hussain 2020: 5). As a result, face-to-face education was halted at

all universities on 16 March 2020 (Öçal et al. 2021; Sarac 2021); remote tertiary education likely commenced on the same day. According to the 2021 statistics, around 148,000 international students were enrolled at various universities in Turkey (The Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities [YTB] 2021). Thus, Turkey was concerned with keeping the education sector and students secure (Öçal et al. 2021), active and motivated through instructors with technical experience (Watson 2020; Ko and Rossen 2017) and technological capabilities (Tanhua-Piiroinen et al. 2020). In this manner, online education was promoted (Jäger-Biela et al. 2020; Andersen and Nielsen 2020).

Many Southeast Asian students attend universities in Turkey. Because online education has not been the primary means of instruction, some unfavourable situations, such as feelings of isolation, lack of motivation, and internet interruption, are to be expected (Novikov 2020: 295; Karkar-Esperat 2018: 1722–1723; Titrek et al. 2016: 151; Sawir 2005: 569). Despite the fact that distance education is becoming increasingly popular around the world, little is known about students' experiences, particularly in their academic lives (Brown et al. 2015: 1; Basit and Tomlinson 2012; Radloff and Coates 2010). Similarly, there is a dearth of research on Southeast Asian students with foreign student status in Turkey, even though distance education has been implemented here a few decades ago (Hismanoglu 2012: 187; Samur et al. 2011: 1326). This study therefore aims to dive into the experiences and challenges (distance education, learning experiences, social life, etc.) faced by Southeast Asian students enrolled in Turkish universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, this research includes the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework to evaluate distance education from their perspectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies show that students in higher education in Canada can benefit from online education if instructors provide clear standards and create an environment in which students can interact with their classmates. However, according to the report, some instructors and students are unsure about the quality and value of online education (Aderibigbe 2021) though they can benefit from digital technology (Daniel 2011). Although online education is becoming increasingly popular around the world due to the use of advanced technology (Palvia et al. 2018) in the classroom, which instructors use to

increase student engagement (Aderibigbe 2020; Magyar et al. 2020; Troussas et al. 2020), some educators and students prefer face-to-face education (Camarero et al. 2012; Comer and Lenaghan 2012). As a result, online education did not always succeed at first. The United States (U.S.), which implemented online education 14 years ago, currently supports hybrid or blended education (Palvia et al. 2018: 235). In online education, the quality of teaching and learning, as well as pedagogical and curricular design, instruction, and a collaborative atmosphere, continue to be challenging (Garrison 2017).

Like developed countries (Greenland and Moore 2014), some developing countries, particularly India, have launched online education due to critical factors that include the growth in internet and smartphone use, low-cost internet, and so on. With infrastructure support, countries in Asia and the Middle East too have launched online education platforms at the university level despite some major issues, such as low-speed internet and a lack of materials (Palvia et al. 2018: 236–237). However, Muthuprasad et al. (2021) contend that during the COVID-19 pandemic, India also faced technical hurdles such as access to the appropriate equipment and bandwidth for online teaching. Select African countries that have better internet connectivity, such as South Africa and Ghana, were also able to run online education (Kotoua et al. 2015), though various cultural and local difficulties had to be addressed first (Joshua et al. 2015). Recent research has underlined the importance of teachers' roles in facilitating online instruction and engaging students in online education (Aderibigbe 2020, 2021; Mena-Guacas and Velandia 2020). For example, Aderibigbe (2021) argues that using various pedagogical approaches and tools, instructors must try to reinforce students' classroom learning experiences through online education, where advanced technology can be an outstanding tool for the instructors to increase the engagement of the students (Aderibigbe 2020). Additionally, a study shows that higher education students in Canada can benefit from online education if the instructors are actively involved in learning (Mena-Guacas and Velandia 2020), supply full guidelines, and ensure an environment suitable for students to engage with their fellow mates (Aderibigbe 2021).

Furthermore, parental support is essential in any learning situation. Instructors' success in influencing students' performance depends on parental involvement in education (Rasmitadila et al. 2020), and this is especially true for online education (Öçal et al. 2021; Makrooni 2019; Woofter 2019; Goldman 2005; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). Given the

current scenario, it appears that the online education system must provide a lasting alternative to teaching and learning (Korableva et al. 2019a, b; Vasilev et al. 2018). Unlike industrialised countries, many Asian countries are still struggling to transition to a virtual education platform (Bandalaria and Figueroav 2018; Puttapithakporn 2018; SEAMEO Regional Open Learning Centre [SEAMOLEC] 2018; Maftuh 2011; Nguyen 2009; Song and Chan 2008; Tint 2018). Maftuh (2011: 6) has classified Southeast Asian countries based on their internet connectivity and ICT integration into distance education. Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Singapore lead the first category with the most points, followed by Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam in the second category, and Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste in the third.

In Turkey, the global and local economic crisis during the 1980s led to the implementation of low-cost distance education in universities to ensure equity for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who could not afford residential programmes (Samur et al. 2011; Berberoglu 2010; Selvi 2006; Ruzgar 2004). Thus, the country introduced open and distance education programmes at a university in 1982 (Zawacki-Richter et al. 2016: 113, 115).[1] Since then, many universities started distance education study programmes because of the increased interest in distance education at the tertiary level (Samur et al. 2011: 1327). Until 2015, over 50 Turkish universities launched distance education programmes. In 2014, Turkey claimed that almost 50% of its students (about 2.5 million students out of 5.5 million) were enrolled in the distance higher education programme (Zawacki-Richter et al. 2016: 113, 115). At the same time, the Higher Education Council of Turkey limited universities to offer only 30% of their total credits. This shows that some Turkish universities were ready for distance education, seen in the increased rates in students' enrolment in distance education with a growing economy and advancement in ICT (Zawacki-Richter et al. 2016: 115, 116).

However, although distance education must include learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-learner interaction, culturally the formal design of Turkish distance education programme does not include learner-learner interaction (Samur et al. 2011: 1328; Ruzgar 2004: 26) which may have affected the performance of the Southeast Asian students in Turkey. In this regard, the cost of internet package matters, as it may dampen students' access to distance education (Zawacki-Richter et al. 2016: 123). Thus, there is a similarity between the educational problems

of Turkey and those of other Asian countries, which also struggle with the lack of resources, limited access to information technology, and so on (McIsaac et al. 1988).

METHODOLOGY

For this exploratory study, Istanbul, Turkey's megacity is chosen as the study location for two reasons, namely, many Southeast Asian students are enrolled in universities here, and it is logistically convenient. Respondents were selected using the snowball sampling technique with the assistance of a Southeast Asian student at the Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University (Baker 1994: 165; Babbie 1986). Seventeen Southeast Asian students (nine males and eight females) were chosen using the snowball technique. Nine students were from Indonesia, three from Malaysia, one from Myanmar, two from the Philippines, and two from Thailand. Interviewees belonging to the age group between 19 and 35 years old comprised six undergraduates, seven master's students, and four PhD students. Respondents (undergraduate and postgraduate students) were drawn from public and private universities in Turkey. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to interview them (Baker and Edwards 2012: 41) in May and June 2021. The data gathered have been organised into many themes and sub-themes (Table 1), evaluated using an interpretative data analysis method (Creswell 2014; Neuman 2011; Goffman 2002; Bechhofer and Paterson 2000; Denzin and Lincoln 1998). The Ethics Review Board of Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University approved the study, and the interviews were conducted between May and June 2021.

Based on the similarities between types (Baker and Edwards 2012: 5), the information is divided into separate themes and sub-themes for thematic analysis. Since social life can only be understood through interpretation, the interview results were prepared utilising the interpretative data analysis method (Goffman 2002; Bechhofer and Paterson 2000). In addition, while assessing online interviews, some of the respondents' quotes were incorporated (Baker and Edwards 2012: 10).

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes

No.	Themes	Sub-themes
1	Socio-demographic background	Sex; country of birth and citizenship; duration of stay in Turkey; place of stay in Turkey; financial support for the study, etc.
2	Current study programme	Discipline; a programme of study; year of study.
3	Social life perception and experience during COVID-19	Health; personal psychology and security; financial aspect; relationship with fellow students and communities; contact with local people; local language and culture; social responsibility; environmental awareness, etc.
4	Distance education perception and experience during COVID-19	Personal resources for distance education; the infrastructure of the distance education; teachers' readiness and course materials; critical analysing skills; adaptation; international student status, etc.
5	Perception about future study	Comparison between face-to-face education and distance education; possibility of continuation of study in Turkey; evaluation of future study, etc.

Source: Author.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study investigates the perceptions and experiences of international Southeast Asian students in Turkey through the lens of the CoI framework, which is specifically used to evaluate distance education and its outcomes for the community.

Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, all Turkish universities switched to online education. Because policymakers had to make a quick decision to use this approach, the authorities of many educational institutions were perplexed because they were unprepared for it. Based on the social constructivist approach, the CoI framework is a pedagogical model that tries to meaningfully create online teaching and learning by bridging the gap between learners' needs, technology, and pedagogy (Garrison 2017). As a result, numerous earlier studies proposed including learner presence alongside cognitive, social, and teaching presences (Bektashi 2018: 147).

The CoI framework includes both instructors and learners to demonstrate critical thinking and engage actual people to be effective (Garrison and Arbaugh 2007; Garrison et al. 1999). Existing literature shows that this dynamic framework is mainly applied at the tertiary level of education (Akyol and Garrison 2011; Swan et al. 2009). Garrison et al. (1999) proposed

three types of CoI framework components, including cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence, which assure knowledge acquisition through interaction among these components. These three components of the CoI framework serve as the foundation for empirical research on distant, blended, and online education (Befus 2016: 1).

Cooper and Scriven (2017) contend that the three components ensure that teachers have the opportunity to participate in curriculum creation, development, and sequential educational experiences, which can improve the online education environment (see Figure 1). In this study, existing distant education is examined using the CoI paradigm, where teaching presence includes the elements influencing educators' developing, facilitating, and leading courses, spanning from course design to material delivery to resource availability. It also includes an online classroom environment (cross-cutting with social presence) and regulating learning (cross-cutting with cognitive presence); social presence represents an environment in which engaging students and academics and building a learning community emerged as essential features of the learners' social and emotional presence as "real people" in online/blended communication; and cognitive presence characterises the education by which the variety in learning styles, summative assessments, and discussion forums influence the students' ability to construct the meaning of concepts through sustained communication among the learners' community (Feng et al. 2017; Garrison 2017; Akyol and Garrison 2011; Garrison et al. 2010).
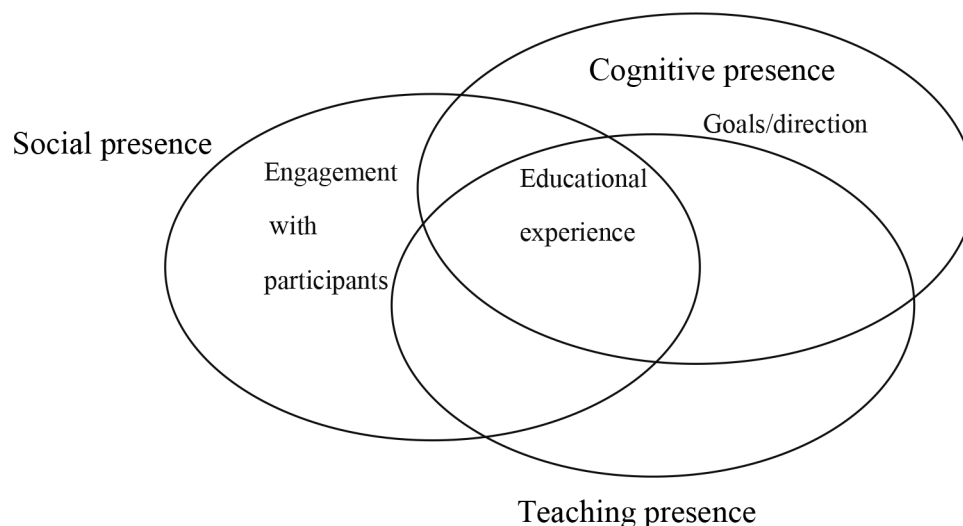

Figure 1: Elements of an educational experience.
Source: Garrison et al. (2010).

FINDINGS

In this section, the themes and sub-themes described in the methodology section are analysed to achieve the research objectives. In doing so, the respondents' socio-demographic background, followed by their current study programme, perspectives and experiences of social life during COVID-19, perspectives and experiences of distant education, as well as the perception of Southeast Asian students towards future study in Turkey are considered.

Socio-demographic Background

Even though the respondents come from practically every country in Southeast Asia, the majority are from Indonesia. There is gender balance among the respondents, who represent students in the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth years. This means that all the respondents have spent more than a year in Turkey. Most respondents are self-funded students, with the remainder receiving scholarships (either through the Turkish Government Scholarship programme or elsewhere). The scholarship recipients interviewed are also worried about the cancellation of the scholarship due to poor academic performance. The majority of the respondents live in a shared flat with their peers. Those who became stranded in Turkey and those who returned home are concerned about their future education in Turkey because most of them belong to middle-class or lower-class families. Most of the participants mention that they belong to a large family with only one income-generating person who must maintain more than four siblings' education and other expenses in their home countries. "Life in Istanbul is expensive for us, but the time ahead looks bleak due to the uncertainty of this situation. The expenses are soaring, leaving us worried about the tuition fees".

Most of the respondents feel that the COVID-19 pandemic affected their study irrespective of the gender and level of study in several ways. "I do not find staying here makes sense primarily because distance education to me is not meaningful".

Current Study Programme

The respondents are diverse in terms of education programmes (undergraduate and graduate programmes), disciplines (natural sciences, social sciences, Islamic sciences, and business studies), gender, and

socioeconomic status, all of which provide an overall picture of how their distance education is influenced. For instance, the use of online/distance education has had a negative impact on postgraduate students (particularly PhD students). This is because PhD programmes are generally constructed in such a way that a personal touch is required. "PhD is not just about attending classes; rather, this involves constant directions and advice from the supervisors. Losing the sight from the supervisor may push the candidate into the corners".

Moreover, graduate students, i.e., both masters and PhD students, claim that they could not participate in conferences while some of them could not consult with their thesis supervisors and conduct their fieldwork and participant observation due to social distancing measures in Turkey. Thus, they find their graduate study ineffective and unproductive: "The current situation is forcing us to abandon all these leaving us in jeopardy". This does not mean that these students tended to defy the health directives such as social distance, etc. The view of the majority is that "distance education can be a temporary solution during a crisis but cannot be an alternative to teaching and learning for an uncertain period".

One undergraduate respondent views the situation thus: "The discipline I am specialising needs me to use software design, development, etc. which requires practical classes. This means software design is something that could not be taught online efficiently. It seems we lapsed this year, and we may need to repeat the course. However, it incurs an extra cost for tuition". This view was echoed by a few other respondents as well.

Social Life Perception and Experience during COVID-19

Human impressions of social life differ depending on their social integration, social coherence, life satisfaction, and other factors. It indicates that views of social life change as a result of the usage of various metaphors to extend the meaning of social life. As a result, persons who have positive social experiences and are satisfied with their social lives are more likely to participate in community activities than people who suffer from depression, anomy, negative affection, and helplessness (Meier 2015; Blanco and Diaz 2007). In this study, social life perception refers to Southeast Asian students' experiences and perspectives during the pandemic while living in a nation other than their home countries. As a result, they have various experiences and issues when it comes to social distancing and remote education. There is little doubt that the perception and experience of

social life have been considerably impeded, regardless of origin or gender. It has been difficult for first- and second-year students to break through the expatriate bubble because they are new to Turkey. Their limited time in Turkey has also resulted in limited local-foreign exchanges, which leaves them feeling estranged. Similarly, Islam (2022: 143) argues that a lack of social network and participation makes individuals lonely and affects their perception.

"We came to Turkey in 2019. Later in the middle of March 2020 the universities shifted to distance education. We got stuck in the home; no social and in-campus activities. So, our survival level of the Turkish language remained the bare minimum. This impacts our class instructions because some local language courses offer some courses. The pandemic, in fact, has so many indirect effects on our life".

In Turkish tertiary education, a mixed medium of instruction is used (70% local language, 30% English, and some courses are offered in Arabic as well). One student from the Islamic Studies master's programme, for example, claims to be enrolled in a programme where Arabic is the medium of teaching. By making social relationships, he hopes to improve his conversational skills. Most of the respondents state that they struggle with the language. Some of them have stated that they wish to be unenrolled so that they can return home. This echoes their difficulties, which have been aggravated by their lack of adequate internet access and speed to participate in virtual schooling from their native country. All of this has increased their costs because they have had to acquire additional gigabytes in order to stay connected. Majority of the students also avoid joining various on-campus clubs, including the environment club, sports club, dancing club, language club, and international students club, during the distance education. This membership provides extracurricular activities throughout the school year such as environment clean-up, football matches, debate competitions, donation collection, and social awareness building.

Distance Education Perception and Experience

Some students consider the infrastructure of their university for distance learning excellent, while others find it insufficient. The interviews reveal that most of the respondents attend classes on a regular basis. However, they do not feel as though they are learning as much as they did in a physical class. Nevertheless, they believe that they will be promoted to the next academic year if they have sufficient class attendance, irrespective of the

quality of their learning. The vast majority of respondents state that they do not have their own laptop or enough space to engage fully in class.

The students assume that they cannot listen to the instructors or open the microphone because they share a student flat with their peers; for instance, one might be sleeping while another was having an online class. As a result, they simply open Google Meet or Microsoft Teams with the sound turned down to demonstrate to the teacher that they are present in class (minimum class attendance is mandatory to sit for mid-term and final exams). Respondents who share dorms with other students have trouble attending classes on a regular basis, even when they have adequate internet access. Because their housemates are asleep, they have to miss classes on occasion. Furthermore, as a result of many employers' work-from-home rules, some participants are dissatisfied with the internet's speed, particularly during peak hours when everyone is online because frequent internet access determines the success of distance education (Zhang and Xue 2015: 71). On the other hand, half of the respondents think the course teachers' performance and preparation are adequate, while the other half think it is insufficient. One undergraduate respondent is pleased with the performance of the course lecturers who actively engage students in online classrooms: "While giving lectures prepared on PowerPoint slides, the lecturers used to give the floor to the class, sometimes to each of us, so that we could join in the dialogue or ask the lecturers questions. We preferred those classes over the ones where the teachers were less enthused".

Undergraduate students are generally satisfied with course instructors' performance; however, all the master's and PhD students are dissatisfied with the course instructors' ability to create an effective discussion atmosphere during class. Nonetheless, one master's student sees distance learning as a benefit, stating, "As a mother of a two-year-old infant, I found this distance learning to be the ideal option for me to take care of my kid while also focusing on my studies". On the other hand, another master's student expresses differently:

"In Turkey, I felt as if I could not do anything. This event has made it difficult for me to socialise with my friends, and I am unable to address more complex matters with my supervisor, even for educational purposes". Many activities that could have helped the student improve his or her skills and abilities are prohibited in this situation.

Nonetheless, most of the participants believe that the course materials provided during online education are adequate because, regardless of course instructors' performance, they usually upload course materials for students;

however, a few claim that some instructors do not upload course materials to the system in a timely manner. During research on the development of critical analysing skills among Southeast Asian students studying at various universities in Istanbul, all the students argue that they are unable to critically analyse any issue because they are unable to participate in the class discussions. Because distance education is not interactive and the Southeast Asian students have limited conversation with their instructors and fellow students (Samur et al. 2011), they cannot learn about gender equality, women's rights, and so on. As a result, their feeling of civic responsibility has not increased as a result of their online education. They only need to understand a few concepts to get through the semester. Consequently, the majority of participants felt that distance education is unproductive since it does not incorporate all system partners. For them, it is one-sided in the sense that the professors provide lectures, and they only listen to them. According to one respondent:

> "At the height of COVID-19, I can claim that I had a more difficult time in my academic life in remote education. I was negatively affected both personally and academically. Because of the uncertainty of the situation, my personal life has become boring; I lack the motivation to accomplish anything, including studying".

The majority of participants are unable to use the remote learning technology. In this regard, my query is whether their status as overseas students has helped them in adjusting to the distance education system. The majority of respondents state that their status as international students played a significant role in their inability to cope with this system because they are living away from their home, parents, and familiar social environment, as well as having to share their rooms with other students, and they are afraid of contracting the coronavirus. As a result, they conclude that they have a very tough life in Turkey during the pandemic, and were affected psychologically, financially, and academically; these experiences serve as a significant impediment to enjoying classes and dealing with the remote education system.

Perception about Future Study

In terms of their perceptions of face-to-face and online learning, all respondents believe that their academic accomplishment during online learning is comparable to that of face-to-face on-campus education. They also express anxiety that their grade point average (GPA) may decrease as

a result of their online education because they are studying outside of their native countries and their families have high expectations of them. Because their families' cash flow is contingent on their academic achievement, this will impact their future academic careers; meaning that as long as the Southeast Asian students achieve the desired GPA as per their parents' expectations, they will receive their education expenses from home. So, if their GPA falls during distance education, they have to stop their overseas education. Therefore, one-third of respondents are doubtful if they will continue their academic sessions in Turkey in the future. Furthermore, more than half of them consider distance education ineffective. As a result, because all students believe that returning to campus education is not guaranteed, this condition may serve as a stimulus for them to return to their home countries.

DISCUSSION

Southeast Asian students' perceptions and experiences at a Turkish institution are revealed through the thematic analysis of information obtained through in-depth interviews. Despite the fact that the Southeast Asian students originate from a variety of socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, the respondents claim that their ethnic identities do not affect their performance during their education both on-campus and distance learning in Turkey. However, cultural differences make it difficult for these students to adjust to the distance education programme due to their lack of interaction with instructors and peers. As Ruzgar (2004) observes, national cultures, with their differences in class, gender, religion, etc., impact the learning processes of distance education. This finding is also consistent with other studies demonstrating that international students are lonely, which impedes their assimilation into the local society and culture (Lalla 2015; Lee and Rice 2007; Bevis 2002). Whereas, if they could speak the local language, they could learn Turkish culture (Islam and Bozdağ 2021), particularly the education culture, which would ease their adaptation to distance education.

According to other studies, cultural differences have a higher impact on online education than face-to-face education (Fang 2007: 238; Zhao et al. 2005: 1865). In this regard, these are students from Southeast Asian countries who have to receive their education in a country considered to be part of the European belt; moreover, they study in Istanbul, which is

also the home of Western culture. As a result, they struggle to adapt to a new culture in which individualism takes precedence over collectivism, a particular trait of Southeast Asian countries (Kang and Chang 2016; Uzuner 2009). The students who began their 2019 academic year and impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak did not have much time to connect with the local community or learn the local language, which may be considered one of the challenges when enrolling in the compulsory distance education programme (Novikov 2020: 270; Brown et al. 2015: 6–8). Indeed, language proficiency influences the success of international students in both educational and non-educational parts of the local community (Karkar-Esperat 2018; Lalla 2015; Chen and Bennett 2012; Yeboah 2011). Besides, overseas students' experiences with distance education differ from those of local students. According to Simonson et al. (1999: 71), it is the teachers' obligation to create a pleasant classroom environment while taking into account all of the students' differences. This feature makes it easier to use the CoI framework designed for the online classroom (Feng et al. 2017; Garrison 2017; Akyol and Garrison 2011; Garrison et al. 2010) as it considers how the active participation of both instructors and learners makes for an effective distance education (Garrison and Arbaugh 2007; Garrison et al. 1999).

Furthermore, Southeast Asian students have a wide range of experiences depending on their academic fields. Several students, for example, failed applied courses that required in-depth analysis of specific vocabulary, codes, and other material that could only be obtained through face-to-face education. This is consistent with the findings of a prior study, which discovered limitations in the expression of mathematical symbols and a scarcity of learning management systems and multimedia software to promote online learning (Irfan et al. 2020: 147). Irfan et al. (2020: 153) believe that content presentation is the most difficult for mathematics professors in online education, which corresponds to the CoI framework's instructional presence which enables us to understand how a synchronous learning environment is necessary for an effective education platform. As a result, online education is rendered ineffective.

Furthermore, as indicated by a previous study of doctorate nursing students, online education is unsuccessful for PhD students who are dissatisfied with their distance education since they did not have enough opportunity to discuss current concerns with their course lecturers and classmates (Molassiotis et al. 2020: 3). It indicates that distance education should not be employed in all sectors unless it can keep students interested and provide well-designed instructional materials (Taylor and White

1985: 13). It has been shown too that distance education students want to communicate more with their professors and expect their teachers to know more about them (Grothaus and Zawacki-Richter 2021: 496; Nguyen 2009: 1; Richardson and Long 2003: 226). Garrison et al. (2010) suggest this concept of social presence in their CoI paradigm for virtual education and argue that open communication and group cohesion can reflect the community of learners and its collaborative activities. Thus, the CoI framework through social presence expresses the ability of the learners as real people both socially and emotionally in the distance and on-campus education environments (Garrison and Arbaugh 2007: 159).

Due to travel restrictions and a lack of internet access in those developing countries, Southeast Asian students could not return to their home countries during the pandemic (Berman 2008: 1). This data backs up a study that countries in the global South lacked advanced technology, resulting in unequal access to virtual classroom environments for students (Jamtsho et al. 2010). Furthermore, because distance and online education are more expensive than on-campus education for both institutions and students, students had to pay an additional charge for the speed and continuing support of the internet in Turkey (Raza 2008: 496, 498). Similarly, because they have been confined to their homes, away from their friends and relatives, they have grown lonely, which has caused them to feel afraid and worried about their education and future life. Thus, loneliness is a prominent factor among international students engaged in distance education (Karkar-Esperat 2018; Chen and Bennett 2012; Sawir et al. 2008; Ku and Lohr 2003). Loneliness has also hampered sociability, social obligation, and other activities among Southeast Asian international students in Turkey. According to Sawir et al. (2008: 148), developing international and local student relationships can help international students feel less lonely.

As the Southeast Asian students in Turkey during the pandemic period have a terrible experience with distance education, many have considered it to be a waste of time. Their point is that they do not interact with their instructors as much as they do with their peers. Consequently, these students are restless because they lack emotional engagement. This setting makes it harder for them to form bonds with others, which is a cognitive presence condition. This finding is similar to the findings of other studies, which claim that distance education, which divides instructors and students and produces anxiety, is unable to foster a sense of community among students. Therefore, Grothaus and Zawacki-Richter (2021: 496) have proposed collaborative online learning that involves the interaction between professors

and students. Otherwise, students will perceive distance education only as a means to pass classes regardless of the quality of the training provided (Sun and Rueda 2012: 202; Drouin and Vartanian 2010: 147; Taylor and White 1985: 18). Furthermore, the students report that the course instructors are unprepared for the online classes, with some simply showing a few slides and others only explaining ideas without using a Power Point presentation. Furthermore, interview results show that the instructors use earlier teaching strategies that are intended to be reformed rather than repeated to ensure their active participation, as Carver (2012: 324) has advised that the instructors apply fresh ideas and approaches rather than the same old ones. Drouin and Vartanian (2010: 156) also recommend that students perform more work and participate in more activities to develop a sense of community among them. However, the lack of language ability does limit their ability to converse (Sawir 2005: 574), which is also a factor covered in the CoI framework's social presence, as well as their writing skills, which impact the success and confidence of students who receive such training (Molassiotis et al. 2020: 6). Therefore, Turan and Islam (2021) claim that language plays a significant role in integrating individuals into the mainstream community. Following Turan and Islam (2021), this study agrees that if Southeast Asian students obtain the opportunity to learn the Turkish language, they could develop other skills during distance education.

Therefore, while distance education can work across time and space (Bozkurt 2019; Lalla 2015; Ghosh et al. 2012), the Southeast Asian international students are generally dissatisfied with the system (Karkar-Esperat 2018: 1724), despite the misconception that Southeast Asian students, like other Asian students, are less likely to achieve high academic performance in international settings (Karkar-Esperat 2018: 1724; Ngo and Lee 2007: 415). Therefore, these students are unsure whether they will continue their studies in Turkey due to a lack of desire, poor performance, and other factors.

CONCLUSION

Although online education is seen as a supplement to traditional schooling (Simonson et al. 1999: 62), it was not widely employed in Turkey until the coronavirus's exceptional global spread. Furthermore, little is known in Turkey about the advantages and disadvantages of this type of education, which incorporates all stakeholders from many perspectives. Moreover, despite the fact that distance education is not a novel concept in Southeast

Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Myanmar, and others (Bandalaria and Figueroav 2018; Ministry of Education Singapore 2018; Puttapithakporn 2018; SEAMOLEC 2018; Tint 2018; Buraphadeja and Kumnuanta 2011; Maftuh 2011; Song and Chan 2008; Williams and Jacobs 2004), why do students from this region have negative perceptions and experiences about distance education in Turkey? Titrek et al. (2016: 151) offer one response to this question, saying that language is one of the most significant barriers that international students face in Turkey, alongside other concerns such as communication, cultural differences, and so on. Looking at the research topic through the CoI framework, it can be stated that, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey's massive introduction of distance education has been marred by problems related to teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence, since a participatory environment for international students, particularly those from Southeast Asia, could not be created. As a result, this specific group of international students in Turkish universities does not believe virtual education is beneficial since they did not receive additional efforts and cooperation from course instructors (Kang and Chang 2016: 789) and became lonely and anxious during the period of social distancing.

Southeast Asian students are concerned about their future studies in Turkey due to a lack of interest and abilities developed through distance education, such as conversation and language skills. Lalla (2015: 199) therefore proposed a variety of ways to make education more inclusive for international students, including a special curriculum and low context communication style, whereas Karkar-Esperat (2018: 1731), Kang and Chang (2016: 789), and Carver (2012: 326) emphasise the role of instructors, course design based on students' needs, and international student cooperation. Furthermore, Sawir et al. (2008: 172) advocate for international groups that might help international students create intimacy and overcome loneliness. To make virtual distance education beneficial, the three types of presence in distance education, namely teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence will be maintained in this manner. As a result, in accordance with Alias (2012: 137–143), it is concluded that a web-enabled learning console can be designed and implemented to keep international students, particularly students from Southeast Asia, motivated while participating in online distance education, as well as to integrate these students into the existing education system.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

The study was conducted following the approval of the Ethics Review Board at Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University (ethics approval number E-20292139-050.01.04-7081).

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NOTES

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1   At this time, "distance learning" was defined differently under the name of open education in Turkey. Students did not need to come to campus; they collected the study materials and then sat for face-to-face exams. This open education system is still available in some Turkish universities, including Anadolu University, Istanbul University, Ankara University, and Ataturk University.

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