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University students’ perception to online class delivery methods during the COVID-19 pandemic: A focus on hospitality education in Korea and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The general process of learning in educational institutions around the globe has changed since the advent of the COVID-19 virus. Educational sectors in all nations are forced to adapt and rearrange their compositions and systems as the virus spreads. The current study considers the characteristics and issues related to universities moving towards online and blended learning during this period of universal isolation. Through focus group interviews conducted in South Korea and Malaysia, the study provides recommendation for the improvement of online classes and blended learning. The use of student focus groups gives the research an alternative perspective with which to assess the satisfaction level, success, and quality of online learning programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results from the focus groups show that for the success of online learning to become a reality, blended education should be considered to bolster learning. Further, results show that communication between lecturers and students remains a fundamental factor for success, regardless of the class category incorporated. Consequently, the results of the study provide further insight into matters experienced by students during the pandemic, and how educators may heed the opinions of students when improving future related blended learning programs.

1. Introduction

The unprecedented impact and rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on all facets of human life. The way people have altered how they travel, work, interact with one another, and even educate themselves has drastically changed since the arrival of the virus. With regards to the educational sector, a report released by UNESCO in 2020 indicates that worldwide school closures impacted close to 90% of all learners during the month of March 2020, with this percentage gradually tapering off to around 60% in June of 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). Due to a lack of knowledge regarding the nature of the COVID-19 virus, and the uncertainty surrounding the timespan and effects of the virus, most countries gave little to no initial thought regarding secondary, or even

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2021.100336
Received 13 November 2020; Received in revised form 24 August 2021; Accepted 2 September 2021
Available online 8 September 2021
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tertiary education classes going online. The unremitting spread of the virus had brought about strict isolation measures which delayed educational institutions across the globe from commencing with classes. COVID-19 had effectively forced schools and universities to temporarily close, and thus expectations entertaining the idea of bringing educational courses from an offline face-to-face method, to an online progression had received almost no consideration. This was further exasperated by the fact that most governments placed greater importance on combatting, and mitigating the effects of the virus, or on stimulating national economies to maintain economic stability in their respective countries. Still, as the pandemic continued, and showed no signs of dissipating, the issue of restarting educational institutions through various mechanisms began to gain traction (Jowsey et al., 2020). Governments across the globe began to assess the best ways in which to continue the leaning process for scholars (WHO, 2020). It was during this period that the impressions of online class learning received much attention. For example, Choi, Kim, and Robb (2020), while assessing online learning improvements in Korean students during the pandemic, found that diversification in the teaching curriculum implemented by educators, led to greater levels of learner satisfaction in their online courses. Demuyakor (2020), in a study of Ghanaian students studying in China found that online learning programs were supported by the majority of students. Finally, Goh and King (2020) revisited the use of technology in higher education during the pandemic to provide an overview of techniques educators could employ to overcome disruptions during online learning. Despite the recent plethora of novel research in the field of online learning (Bao, 2020), contradictory opinions relating to the matter of online course characteristics still exist (Gossling, Scott, & Hall, 2020), leaving opportunities to focus much attention and interest on the topic during this period of educational limbo (Wang, 2020). Nowhere were these conflicting opinions towards online courses being more discussed than in the domain of higher education (Bao, 2020). Cao et al. (2020) noted that university learners were particularly susceptible to changes in teaching practices as the psychological impact of the COVID-19 brought about greater levels of anxiety and other mental health issues. According to Wang, Horby, Hayden, and Gao (2020), learners in higher education often have contradictory opinions relating to their satisfaction and preference towards online learning techniques. These issues are generally associated with higher levels of fear and anxiety caused by the need to find future employment (Cao et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

With a focus higher education during the current pandemic, research in the discipline of hotel, travel, and tourism education have gained traction (O’Connor, 2021). While the pandemic has influenced the learning practices of many university courses and majors (Bao, 2020), the field of tourism and hospitality education has been particularly affected due to the nature of the courses; which have always required students to conduct a certain amount of offline work to gain practical experience in the field of tourism (Choi et al., 2020). Thus, this study introduces a nascent topic in the study on COVID-19 and education by considering the perspectives of learners in the field of tourism and hospitality as these individuals consider the impact online classes are having on their overall learning experiences. This study therefore provides several important outcomes which can contribute additional insight into the tourism and hospitality literature. Firstly, the current research aims to contribute to hospitality and tourism research by investigating the perceptions and satisfaction of students towards online learning in these disciplines. Second, this research differentiates between several online delivery methods to interpret which methods were well received by learners. Finally, this paper measures the above mentioned factors (delivery method and satisfaction) and educator-learner communication techniques from a bi-country perspective. It is anticipated that these study outcomes will lend support to the field of tourism research by contributing towards literature in both active learning theory (Mitchell, Petter, & Harris, 2017) and program (curriculum) development (Tuna & Başdal, 2021). To entertain this topic further, a group of students (from South Korea and Malaysia) involved in an inter-country university hospitality program called AIMS (Asian International Mobility for Student) were approached to partake in a focus group style interview. The program is a cooperation partnership between South Korea and other South East Asian nations, and focuses on the development of young learners to create experts in the Asian region. This study was therefore able to explore university students’ perception related to the issues of online learning delivery methods and the matter of quality improvement as it relates to online classes in hospitality education which were brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Barrows (2000) suggests that a focus group technique has become an increasingly prevalent qualitative research tools in the hospitality industry. Thus, to further the relevance of the current research, this study utilizes a Focus Group Interview (FGI) as a qualitative research analysis technique to gauge greater authenticity and applicability in the study results (Barrows, 2000). Additionally, the inclusion of hospitality education presents a unique opportunity for the study during this period of isolation, as historically the characteristics associated with this field of study requires that students involved in hospitality and tourism education focus a greater degree of their learning time on accomplishing real-world exposure and practical experience.

2. Literature review

2.1. Higher education before and after the COVID-19 pandemic

Throughout these extraordinary times, the world has been dedicated to familiarize itself with the COVID-19 pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 (WHO, 2020). The nature of the pandemic has placed a greater importance on social distancing practices between individuals. From the initial outbreak of COVID-19, the rapid spread of the virus has created a cause for concern throughout the world. Thus, to limit the spread of the pandemic, many countries were encouraged by the World Health Organization (WHO) to limit physical interaction between people. To implement the idea of social distancing, many governments initially closed public infrastructures, working environments, and educational institutions to prevent the risk of the virus spreading rapidly. However, despite the best efforts of governments around the globe, the virus continued to spread, leading countries to incorporate travel and study restrictions, or to incorporate self-isolation and quarantine measures to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Among the industries most predisposed to the devastation of the virus is the education sector. Many classes at formal and informal institutions were canceled and a large proportion of international students were forced to return to their home countries (Bao, 2020).
These measures have become a problematic issue, as the education of the general population is considered to be one of the most important aspects for the economic development of any country (WHO, 2020). According to the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDG), quality education is considered the fourth most important goal while most other SDG’s are directly or indirectly associated with education in some form or another. Consequently, educational institutions were forced to find alternative solutions to combat the postponement or cancelation of classes, workshops, and other learner activities. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, educators worldwide are faced with familiarizing themselves to an unusual existence of having to use new technologies, or of having to introduce new teaching theories to implement learning to students. These new approaches to teaching may, in hindsight bring about novel opportunities in the educational sector, as educators are forced to revisit past assumptions as to which manners of teaching are considered best for students. However, this is not the case for all types of education, and in all countries (Gössling et al., 2020; O’Connor, 2021). Although some countries continue with regular offline classes as best possible, or reduce the number of students per class, other countries have taken more drastic measures to reduce the spread of the virus (UNESCO, 2020). In New Zealand for instance, the concept of blended learning has become popular (Jowsey et al., 2020) and was incorporated in many situations to mix technology-enhanced learning with traditional learning experiences (McGarry, Theobald, Lewis, & Coyer, 2015). This form of blended education would thus entail the integration of both face-to-face interaction and technologically facilitated interaction between students and teachers when utilizing learning resources (Bluc, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007). While countries further consider the importance of online classes in education, several learning theories have been incorporated in educational research (Bao, 2020). Among the theories often cited with regards to the current movement towards online learning, the online collaborative learning (OCL) theory has gained much support (Harasim, 2017). OCL focuses on the internet or online learning as a source of learning through the establishment of nurturing collaboration, and building of knowledge in learners (Demuyakor, 2020). To add structure to the current research and provide sustenance to the literature review, elements of the OCL theory have been adapted to contribute to this research. The theory is supported by three pillars and is based on social constructivism, which promotes online learning and knowledge acquisition through idea generation, idea organizing, and intellectual convergence (Demuyakor, 2020; Harasim, 2017), and has been adapted in other online learning studies due to its applicability in e-learning (Bao, 2020).

While some officials and educators agree that the principles of using online learning are counter to the current trend of higher education (Wang, 2020), others agree that this aspect of bringing education online will contribute to a new university education model that would inevitably have emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 virus (Zhu & Liu, 2020). Murphy (2020) for example noted that a large increase in the levels of complexity and effectiveness in the number of educational institutions before the spread of COVID-19 had already existed that had embraced advances in areas such as digital learning to prepare schools and universities for a reshape in the education sector by 2030. Accordingly, COVID-19 has just accelerated the inevitable path education was going to take. Nevertheless, regardless of which side of the fence a person stands on the topic, there is no denying the facts that current advances in technology have changed the way most people conduct their personal and professional lives.

2.2. The impact of COVID-19 on hospitality education and the hospitality industry

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020) the tourism and hospitality sector has been the hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis with rising unemployment, economic damage and instability. While the hospitality industry faces a slow recovery to its pre-virus status, COVID-19 will continue to exert an impact on how hospitality education and businesses operate in the future. Within the tourism industry, the virus is expected to have long-lasting effects that is estimated to change the sector forever. Kaushal and Srivastava (2021) mention that education in tourism and hospitality is related to the tourism industry, as the education of students it dependent on ‘real-world’ sessions, and are thus affected more significantly by the virus (Choi et al., 2020). Additionally, Gössling et al. (2020) notes that “hospitality businesses are expected to make considerable changes to their operations in the wake of a COVID-19”, as these organizations are continuously required to ensure employees’ and customers’ health and safety, and enhance customers’ willingness to patronize businesses in the future. These outcomes have a direct effect on the way hospitality education will change. As an example, Gursoy and Chi (2020) point out that developments in artificial intelligence (AI) and social service robot technologies have enabled the use of AI technologies in service delivery. Thus, such technologies will need to become part of hospitality education curriculums in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic will therefore hasten the popularity of such technology as a way of promoting public safety in the industry.

According to O’Connor (2021) the nature of the travel and tourism industry requires that educators take a very active approach to manage programs and establish active learning strategies that can complement the education. For hospitality education, the role of technology has transformed the teaching and learning processes geared towards hospitality curriculums over the past several decades (Goh & King, 2020). The growing cost of education and other living expenses, has also created a need for change in the traditional education paradigm. The use of technology on a more frequent basis in student’s daily life has encouraged colleges and universities to increasingly supplement traditional courses with online equivalents. Online education is therefore becoming a popular tool for university education to better meet students’ needs, learning styles, and work schedules (Lim, Kim, Chen, & Ryder, 2008). The movement of classes into digital platforms is especially useful for hospitality students who often work part-time for experience in the sector. Thus, online learning practices afford students more flexibility to customize the learning experience with family and work commitments. Thus, an opportunity exists for the hospitality industry where the virus has exposed the need for educational institutions to consider an alignment with the needs of the industry as a whole. In an assessment of hospitality and tourism industry in India during the pandemic, Kaushal and Srivastava (2021) found that although the situation was critical in its influence on the higher education of students, individuals were able to better manage their lives though the utilization of online classes. However, the characteristics of online learning does create several issues addressed in the current research. For example, the nature of tourism and hospitality-based education
dictates that students commit to a certain level of practical learning. This approach to learning is near impossible under the current global situation. Thus, a move towards a greater degree of online learning may be perceived as a negative overall experience for students in this industry. Consequently, the study considers these matters further.

2.3. Delivery methods in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

The advent of COVID-19 has brought about huge challenges for not only the education industry, but for all sectors around the globe. While certain outcomes of the virus are easier to manage than others, the tireless work of individuals around the world have shown the resilience of the human spirit in overcoming this pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020). One massive factor that has helped to curb the negative effects of the virus on the general population has been a renewed reliance on technologies, especially visual communication technology for people to communicate through online means (Bao, 2020). Due to the COVID-19 global crisis, recent studies have therefore placed a greater focus on educational-based technology to successfully manage online classes during this period of isolation (Mulenga & Marbán, 2020). While the initiation of the 4th industrial revolution has changed almost every feature of human life including education, the global community has also observed a paradigm shift in overall learning practices from offline to blended, and fully-online classes in higher education. While certain restraints exist, such as the cost and resource allocation of initially managing online requirements, the appeal of online classes has gained the interest of global universities such as Harvard, Yale and MIT University, to name but a few (Bao, 2020). No one can thus deny that traditional, on-site education can be enhanced, supplemented or even replaced by online education in certain circumstances (Altmann et al., 2019).

There are many advantages that can be found under the format of online education including; ubiquity, personalization, reduced costs, flexibility, increased overall comfort, time saving and convenience (Aithal & Aithal, 2016). Many researchers also report that online education is increasingly favored by students and faculty on a year-by-year basis (Kou & Liu, 2020). Consequently, online education should be considered critical to the overall strategic plans of universities globally (Seirup et al., 2016). There has been a greater push of late into experimenting with e-learning at an unprecedented scale and scope while medical experts around the globe try to find solutions to the epidemic (UNESCO, 2020). While this technology has existed for a long time through the dominance of programs such as Microsoft Skype and Facebook WhatsApp video calling, the need for further advances in online communication technologies has seen a surge in the products available to satisfying the various needs of users. Whether it be communication between small groups of friends, work, or project teams, or for classroom communication; new or updated programs have flooded the markets to fill the desires of all users. While the process of online classes has been extensively studies, a comprehensive review of the literature is best presented by Means, Bakia, and Murphy (2014). These authors conclude that effective online learning comprises of a combination of several modes, or classifications of learning. These manners of learning include face-to-face learning using web-based tools and varying degrees of blended learning (Means et al., 2014). Thus, the use of online presentation techniques may be determined by factors such as the role of students, or the type of class assessment, class size, pedagogy, or feedback methods etc. (Hodges et al., 2020). Also, in an analysis of 182 citations on the topic of online learning by Jowsey, Foster, Cooper-ielu, and Jacobs (2020), the authors identified four major themes in the literature. These subjects include research into active online learning, support for learners and educators, communication between participants, and technological barriers to learning. Therefore, the work of Jowsey et al. (2020) and Means et al. (2014) provides an extensive review with which the current research was able to develop the criteria for online delivery analysis.

With regards to online learning in hospitality education, several programs and products have been used at all levels of the education sector to offer learners an opportunity to study from locations other that the educational institutions; such as from the comfort of learner’s own homes. According to Kou and Liu (2020) learning new online technology is closely associated with, and influences hospitality students’ general satisfaction and perceived quality of their educational experiences. While many products exist, such as Zoom, Cisco’s WebEx, or even Google’s own Google Meets etc. the advantages of each of these products varies greatly with regards to their effectiveness in meeting the needs of educational institutions and students alike. Equally, the sheer scale and level of difficulty in moving a universities classes online potentially creates much disruption to all aspects of a universities systems. These interruptions to the learning process may potentially create major levels of ineffectiveness in the quality of education. Recently Choi et al. (2020) measured the satisfaction levels experienced by tourism and hospitality students with their online learning involvements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings suggested that online learning and student satisfaction was complimented by diversification in the curriculum, and the ability of the university to quickly understand the needs of students when deciding on an online delivery method which had little to no disruptions. While the perceptions of online learning are not universally aligned, the importance of improving the quality of classes cannot be denied. According to Wang and Hu (2019), online learning provides students with greater control as they are able to reflect over their studies by utilizing technologies readily available to them. However, to a large extent, online learning tends to favor students who are more diligent or who are able to work without supervision. Further, it must be noted that the success of online learning is ultimately contingent on the contents and design of the course, and the interaction between educators and students (Bao, 2020).

It is essential however to note that technology is not always able to replace the work of teachers. Educators are still at the center of providing advice to students, designing assignments, and conducting large numbers of students as best possible. Nonetheless, a review of previous studies shows a lack of consistency (Wang & Hu, 2019) in students’ performance and the level of satisfaction (Jowsey et al., 2020) experienced by students when making a comparison between traditional and online instruction, as the approaches to online learning remains localized, based on the country in question (Lim et al., 2008). Therefore, with a framework developed through current literature (Choi et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Jowsey et al., 2020; O’Connor, 2021), this study places a greater focus on student perceptions towards online education based on the integration of the delivery method incorporated.
3. Method

3.1. Focus group methodology

Focus groups were chosen to produce data on the topic through the process of collective interaction between participants involved. While the field of qualitative research may be considered heterogeneous in nature, the current research incorporates methodological approaches consistent with good focus group practices (Freeman, 2006; Krueger, 1994). Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) note that focus groups provide comprehensive details on matters when collecting data, as they provide a means with which in-depth personal perceptions and insights of group members can be achieved (Barrows, 2000). Consistent with Masadeh (2012) focus group research is valued as a qualitative tool, which can generate detailed insights into topics in a resourceful and timely manner. The gathering of collective group information provides quality outputs, yielding significant insights into topics that may require participants to reflect or contemplate on certain themes (Freeman, 2006). Consequently, and consistent with other types of research (e.g. quantitative research), in advance of the actual focus group discussion taking place, questions were pretested to establish validity, understandability, bias, and clarity (Masadeh, 2012). Questions developed by the researchers were tested on a group of individual students (n = 8) and three researchers familiar with focus group studies. The sample questions were also translated from Korean into English, and back-translated after comments were assessed from the participants. Thereafter, the questions were adapted in accordance with feedback from the participants and researchers, and through utilizing criteria established by Dreachslin (1999): where question clarity; understanding of terminology; and hidden bias errors were all eliminated. In total (based on the recommendations of the pretest responses), two questions were slightly altered to accompany dissimilarities in the technological tools used by participants in the different country samples, and three questions were adjusted to improve the clarity of the questions.

3.2. Study design and sample

Due to the multi-country nature of the study, three focus group sessions were conducted, subdividing the participants based on their enrollment in the Hotel and Hospitality Management at one university in Korea and one in Malaysia. According to Boddy (2005), a focus group should consist of at least three groups of individuals, hence, three focus groups were conducted according to the availability of the participants (Masadeh, 2012). Two focus groups comprised of Korean students, group one (n = 5), and group two (n = 2). The third group took place with Malaysian students enrolled in Hospitality Education (n = 10). While debate still exists regarding the size of individual focus groups, Freeman (2006) confirms that a typical focus group could consist of between six to 12 members drawn from a population, while Prince and Davies (2001) embraced the use of a focus group consisting of four to six members, as a smaller size encouraged discussion and productivity. Further still, some researchers (Boddy, 2005; Seggern & Young, 2003) advocate the use of groups consisting of less than four participants. While no strict rule exists on the best size for a focus group (Masadeh, 2012), the current study considered the advice of Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1990) when establishing the size compositions of the focus groups. Those authors suggest that focus groups should not be too large as to “preclude adequate participation from members” nor be too small that it “fails to provide substantially greater coverage … than an interview with one individual” (Merton et al., 1990). Thus, and with careful consideration to the study context, a total of 17 students were invited to partake in the focus group discussions. Further, the size of the sample was also dictated by the ‘risk factor’ associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to safety concerns associated with the congregation of large groups of students, and strict social distancing regulations on the university campus, this meant it was only possible to collect data from a limited number of students who participated in the university Korea-ASEAN intercountry program provided by the department of Hospitality Education at D University.

3.3. Profile of participants

This study employed an FGI with seven students who recently participated in online courses in Hospitality Education of D University, South Korea through the spring semester of the 2020 academic year. A group of 10 Malaysian students studying at S University were also encouraged to participate, and included in the study, based on their involvement in the same project. To select the sample participants for this research, students from South Korea and Malaysia were nominated. These students were chosen based on their involvement in an ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) led program titled AIMS (Asian International Mobility for Student). AIMS is a Korea-ASEAN run university student exchange project that focuses on the education of experts in ASEAN regions. Founded in

| Table 1 |
| --- |
| **Focus group demographics.** |
| **Measures** | **Items** | **%** |
| Gender | Male | 18% |
| | Female | 82% |
| Academic year in school | Freshman | 11% |
| | Sophomore | 24% |
| | Junior | 18% |
| | Senior | 47% |
| Nationality | Korea | 41% |
| | Malaysia | 59% |
2017, the project encompasses 68 international universities and 12 Korean universities. D University is the only university among this group which offers a course in Hotel Tourism Management, and currently (as of 2021) has cooperation partnerships with three Malaysian Universities.

Study participants taking part in the interview consisted of two freshmen students, four sophomores, three junior-level student and eight students in their senior year in Hospitality Education. Details of the participant demographics are presented in Table 1. Due to the sample specifics of the program, all participants were in their twenties with regards to their age, with gender characteristics showing that three males, and 14 female students took part in the interview. Finally, with regards to class workload, each student was taking an average of four to nine major and liberal arts courses throughout the semester.

3.4. Protocol for focus group

In each university conducting the study, two researchers and students involved in the education program were contacted by a department assistant upon their approval to participate in the survey. Thereafter, the students contacted gathered at department offices of their respective universities on June 19, 2020 in Korea and on August 31, 2020 in Malaysia. The venues for the focus group sessions were selected based on several criteria (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Firstly, seating arrangements were circular, which allowed for better engagement and the ability for all participants to engage in the topic better (Masadeh, 2012). While the locations were made to feel comfortable, care was also taken to make sure these locations were free of any noise for the duration of the sessions. The focus group discussions were all recorded under the student’s agreement and the entire interview process took about 2 h (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) to complete, from 12pm to 2 p.m. As a token of appreciation, participants partaking in the focus group discussions were provided with a souvenir and lunch box (Masadeh, 2012).

According to Prince and Davies (2001) it is necessary for researchers knowledgeable about the subject to conduct the group interviews as a way of maintaining participant attention. Thus, skilled researchers who had studied FGIs on multiple occasions conducted the interviews of students in each group condition (in Korea and Malaysia). In all cases, two experienced moderators facilitated the sessions. One researcher led the open-ended interviews, while the other researcher took notes and recorded the feedback based on the respondents’ agreement. These sessions were recorded to assist in the data analysis of the questions at a later point. According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) most focus interviews should consist of fewer than 12 questions (see Table 2). FGI is a useful and valuable tool for collecting qualitative information for a specific purpose based on observed phenomena or some agreed subject matter (Anderson, 1990; Dilshad & Latif, 2013; Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Thus, to attain good research practices, this study followed the procedures as noted: defining research questions; plan the focus group composition; conduct the focus group; record the responses; analyze the data; validate analysis of the subject matter through literature review; and conclude the study with an overview of the results (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Therefore, upon the clarification of certain demographic information, the focus group interviews were guided by open-ended, semi-structured questions as presented in Table 2.

In further detail, the process utilized to collect data included the following steps: 1) researchers had time to greet and introduce themselves and provide details regarding the research purpose; 2) one researcher who played the role of a moderator asked students in the group discussion to introduce themselves on the basis of demographics including their school year and courses taking through the semester; 3) main topics including their on-line learning experiences and overall satisfaction and suggestions were also obtained; 4) other topics emerging under the focus group discussion, last remarks, and greetings concluded the interview process. Specifically, the research questions included issues related to the varieties of online education platforms, exams, and communication tools utilized for hospitality management courses provided at the participant’s universities. These questions also aimed to encompass issues identified in the assessment of past research on the topic of online learning (Jowsey et al., 2020). Further, to enhance the reliability of the research, the data were translated and analyzed using contents analysis (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Table 2
Sample question transcript for focus group.

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We will discuss your non-face-to-face classes held during the first semester of this year. Our objective is to check the overall satisfaction level of students throughout the semester as they pertain to the introduction of these online classes and delivery methods of these classes which have become a regular feature, due to the onset of COVID-19. The contents of the survey will only be used for research purposes, so please relax and take your time when answering the questions.

1. Please consider your overall satisfaction level with the on-line classes offered for the first semester of 2020, on a scale of one to five; with one being very dissatisfied, two being dissatisfied, three is moderate, four satisfied, and finally five being very satisfied.

2. Throughout the semester three types of online classes were introduced. To jog your memory, I will repeat them. The first is prerecorded video using screen capturing tools not including professor’s face on camera, the second is the same technique of video but including professor’s face on camera, and the third is real-time online lecture using software such as WebEx, etc. Please share with me which of the online options you had experience with and the overall level of satisfaction you experienced with those methods.

3. Have you ever used SNS tools to communicate with the professor in charge of the course and other students? Please elaborate!

4. What do you think should be supplemented to improve the quality of non-face-to-face classes? Please chose from the list below and elaborate your answers. 1) Online class 2) Professor-student communication 3) Student-student communication 4) Test method 5) Discussion/preparation 6) Extracurricular activities such as special lectures, field trips, etc.

5. Please describe your overall level of satisfaction regarding the taking of non-face-to-face exams.

6. If the online courses continue next semester, what type of lecture would you prefer to take? Please expand on your answers.

I would like to thank you all for taking part in the study. Your opinions are appreciated. We would like to offer you a lunch meal and small token of our gratitude before you leave.

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3.5. Data analysis

All focus groups were professionally transcribed. As part of the process of data analysis, after the completion of each focus group, the researchers discussed the overall impressions and issues or problems that needed to be addressed (Prince & Davies, 2001). All participant’s transcripts were reviewed and general themes were established based on cases of repetition and recurrence noted by all researchers involved (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Based on the questions from Table 2 several assessments were concluded. The themes most prevalent throughout the focus group based on the questions were identified and listed in more detail in Table 3. Within Table 3 it is noted that the delivery methods for the study are listed as “Experience with online class type 1, 2, and 3”. To avoid any confusion, ‘online class type 1’ refers to prerecorded video using screen capturing tools not including professor’s face on camera. ‘Online class type 2’ denoted prerecorded videos using screen capturing tools including the professor’s face on camera. Finally, ‘online class type 3’ mentions real-time online lectures using video and interactive software packages. Later, SNS communication tools utilized in the semester are mentioned at the end of Table 3. Most of these SNS tools are familiar to the general reader, however, some are not. Thus, E-class is a tool utilized by D University to upload information between lecturers and students, while WhatsApp and KakaoTalk are popular social chatting systems utilized by both university groups.

Finally, students were asked to consider which materials could be used to supplement current teaching as a way of improving the quality of non-face-to-face classes. Six categories were offered to students. These results are based on the analysis, and are presented in Table 4, and show the perceptions of the students based on options presented to them by the research moderators. As can be easily noted, both forms of communication are seen as the best way of improving online class learning in the future, while additional testing was seen as the least important factor to enhance the online learning experience.

4. Findings

According to the results of the study, online education platforms, exams, and communication tools utilized for courses provided during the spring semester of 2020 are as follows. The questions posed related to a number of themes; thus, the study results are presented under the following topics: respondents’ on-line learning experiences and suggestions for improvements, consisting of types of nonface-to-face courses and class participation experience, issues with exams and grading systems, communication between instructor and students, overall satisfaction with on-line course and suggestions to improve online education. In the succeeding sections we refer to the individuals involved in the research interviews as; the seven Korean participants (KA – KE), and the 10 Malaysian participants (MA – MJ). This was done to ensure that respondents details were kept confidential, ensuring that participants provided authentic answers to the questions. Several important themes manifested themselves through the focus group interactions. These themes were noted during the data analysis and considered further in the succeeding sections.

4.1. Online classes satisfaction

The first major theme discussed at length was that of student’s overall level of satisfaction with moving classes online. The nature of hospitality education dictates the need for practical experience and reduced traditional teaching methods, such as classroom teaching.

Table 3
Survey results.

| Overall satisfaction with online classes for first semester of 2020 | Very Satisfied | Dissatisfied | Moderate | Satisfied | Very Satisfied |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------|----------|-----------|---------------|
| Experience with online class type 1                          | Yes 76%        | No 5%        | Moderate 53% | Satisfied 29% | Very Satisfied 13% |
| Overall satisfaction with online class type 1                 | Very Dissatisfied 0% | Dissatisfied 7% | Moderate 31% | Satisfied 46% | Very Satisfied 16% |
| Experience with online class type 2                          | Yes 71%        | No 29%       | Moderate 17% | Satisfied 50% | Very Satisfied 33% |
| Overall satisfaction with online class type 2                 | Very Dissatisfied 0% | Dissatisfied 0% | Moderate 17% | Satisfied 50% | Very Satisfied 33% |
| Experience with online class type 3                          | Yes 82%        | No 18%       | Moderate 7% | Satisfied 64% | Very Satisfied 22% |
| Overall satisfaction with online class type 3                 | Very Dissatisfied 0% | Dissatisfied 7% | Moderate 7% | Satisfied 64% | Very Satisfied 22% |
| Satisfaction with non-face-to-face exams                      | Very Dissatisfied 5% | Dissatisfied 12% | Moderate 30% | Satisfied 41% | Very Satisfied 12% |
| SNS communication tools utilized in the semester               | E-class 12% | Google Meets 24% | KakaoTalk (Band) 24% | SNS 8% | WhatsApp 16% | Other 16% |
Although it is not always possible to replace the intangible qualities of more intimate face-to-face classes with online materials and processes, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the hand of many educational institutions to do just that (Murphy, 2020). However, from the educator’s point of view, a lack of workload relief and necessary support to conduct classes is often lacking, meaning that certain aspects of the learning experience may suffer (Altmann et al., 2019). Therefore, it remains an important feature to understand how moving classes online would affect the overall perceptions of participants. Interestingly, 95% of the students had a moderate to high level of satisfaction with online classes for the 2020 opening semester. This is in stark contrast to findings from online learning material that show many students view online learning as far less superior than offline classes (Hodges et al., 2020). Several comments made by students confirmed the mixed-to-positive feeling towards online learning. As an example:

I am satisfied with the online classes … All lecturers have been kind and supportive in changing the mode of presentations from normal class to online learning … (Participant MA)

I have an average level of satisfaction … and I had more time to … study English TOEIC. (Participant KB)

I am satisfied with the non-face-to-face class. It was nice to be able to quickly search for words and contents that I did not know in the middle of class, and to reduce commuting time and to take classes in a comfortable environment … (Participant KJ)

I had a moderate level of satisfaction because some of the class especially programing related subjects required us to study using skills we cannot use in online class, but only in the hotel lab. (Participant MB)

4.2. Online delivery methods

Tools used for the on-line courses included real-time Google Meets, by Google, WebEx software offered by Cisco, screencasts containing a digital recording of a computer screen’s display with audio sound, and video-recorded using Microsoft PowerPoint Presentation (PPT) with or without the face of the instructor visible on camera. All participants were exposed to at least one of these three forms of class delivery methods to a certain degree. All students took a variation of the video-recorded courses using PPT screen display with students becoming familiar with these classes without seeing the professors face, and students taking the pre-recorded classes while having the professors face visible. The vast majority of participants also took real-time courses using a variety of video software. The review of the delivery method was an addition to this research that the authors felt could contribute comprehensively to the literature for future research.

Consistent with work by Means et al. (2014), online learning comprised of a mixture of blended learning or a focus of going purely for online tools. The success of these teaching expressions is normally determined by several factors, including the skill-set of the lecturer, role of the students, class size, or the support instructors receive throughout the course (Means et al., 2014). Interestingly, the current research found that all three delivery methods were appreciated by the students. However, it was the second and third type of learning that received the highest praise. Two important themes emerged from these findings. First, students needed communication with professors, and thus required online learning where they could be interactive with the lecturer. And the second, was that students could use the delivery method as a way to organize their class and work life better. As noted, most participants that took the first form of delivery method enjoyed the process but lacked a personal connection to the class.

I only had video-recording PowerPoint presentation with audio. I ended up taking all the courses without seeing the instructors’ face at all. I could not experience blended courses … If I could see the instructor’s face in the beginning and end of the class, I would have been more satisfied. (Participant KG)

Due to a lack of communication, work flow has not run smoothly … that has made the task of solving class problems even harder. (Participant MA)

The second type of learning included the opportunity for students to see the lecturers face during a prerecorded class session. This mode of learning was particularly popular for students. Some of the students felt it was a good way to build up their confidence and knowledge about the class as they could watch the videos more than once. Senior students felt that they could balance their practical experience with their classes as a way of benefiting themselves more. However, as with the first learning style, some students still found the method less personal and missed the interaction with the lecturer and other students.

I am very satisfied with non-face-to-face classes this semester because I was happy about having more personal time to partake in a part-time job and off campus baking and confectionery academic courses. (Participant KF)
I prefer … online learning or apps which the lecturer can shows the PowerPoint slides to the students and use a clear voice so that the students can easily understand the explanation from the lecturer. (Participant MC)

Using ppt is a nice approached to deliver information … but ppt alone made it difficult to understand because the is no lecturer that can help when I encounter difficult theory or term. (Participant MD)

The final type of learning method was the real-time classes. This, more than the other learning types was appreciated by participants who hoped to build a more personal relationship with fellow students and professors alike. Students tended to praise all aspects of the approach when conducted in a proper manner. However, the popularity of this learning style was heavily dependent on the internet connection between parties involved, and the ability of the professor to understand the technology they used.

I liked the lecture this semester … I can hear all the information and the words that my lecturer said. The lecturer always kept in touch with students … shared information during the online classes … helping students to panic less. (Participant ME)

The live system was very unstable and sometimes it was hard to understand and concentrate because of systematic noise. The attendance checking seemed poorly constructed and I felt sorry about this. (Participant KA)

I like to have real-time online lecture … so I can understand more about the subject. (Participant MJ)

4.3. The need for communication

Due to the overwhelming desire of participants to seek out ways of developing greater communication between students and lecturers in the classroom setting, a further theme discussed in the study is the use of communication tools to build the learning experience. Table 3 makes mention of detail regarding communication tools used to link students with one another and the lecturers. There seemed to be a consistent theme that students enjoyed, and were appreciative of lecturers that always kept in touch with their students using basic platform.

I used text messages, e-mails, and group talks in KakaoTalk. For one of my courses I took, the instructor invited more than 20 students to Group talk on KakaoTalk. Group talk on KakaoTalk was most convenient because I could check out class information immediately. (Participant KA)

I personally contacted the instructor by e-mail or text message for one class because that was possible only through the official e-class lecture system. Professor posted almost every notice mostly through e-class. (Participant KC)

A lecturer who was kind and talked in a soft and not rushed manner so I can hear all the information and the words that my lecturer said. One that keep remind me about the assignment, due date and all the important dates such as the date of exam. Even it is my responsibility but the lecturer always gets to remind us(students) about it so we will not forget it. (Participant MF)

4.4. Issues with course evaluation

Towards the end of the interview, students expressed concerns and preferences regarding courses. While absolute evaluation grading was applied to all courses, students also had either open book or real-time exams. The overall introduction of absolute evaluation led to more satisfied evaluations of courses, while room for improvement is considered for the future of online learning. Students made several particular suggestions with reference to the case for online classes and for the continuation of on-line courses in the subsequent semester. These issues were considered by the interviewers and considered further. Respondents had varied opinions regarding exams and the grading system incorporated by the university.

I also had systematic problems with exams on-line. I had to submit my answer on the exam sheet and I could not correct it. I would be happier if the technological problem were solved.” (Participant KE)

The internet connection was maybe unstable during the examination dates which easily will affect my state and depressed me. (Participant MI)

I couldn’t get the answers right away when taking online classes as I felt this would sometimes disrupt the class. (Participant KC)

With non-face-to-face exams, to evaluate our value of understanding for the subjects is limited and it is hard to maintain focus. (Participant MH)

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The current research has focused on the perceptions of hospitality and tourism students as they engage in online learning. This paper has also considered the impact various class delivery methods would have on learners from Malaysia and South Korea as they conducted classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. To establish meaningful results in tourism and hospitality literature as a reference for future scholars to consider, the current research adopted a qualitative research approach using focus groups. Based on the focus group interview, this study collected data from university students in Korea and Malaysia.

While literature focusing on the perceptions of hospitality students towards their online learning level of satisfaction have established mixed outcomes (Demuyakor, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020), the results of this research suggest that learners showed a greater
level of satisfaction at an above average rate with their online courses. Conferring to an analysis of the study findings, several reasons are cited for these interesting findings. For example, some students quoted the availability of more than one mode of class as the greatest reason for their overall satisfaction with the online delivery methods (Jowsey et al., 2020). While students were not able to always choose how to take classes, this insight provides an interesting point of reference. In the above study, students had three options to online learning (refer to Table 3). Upon a further analysis of the focus group interviews it became apparent that learners tried to choose classes based on their preferred delivery method. For example, some students indicated that choosing recorded classes allowed them to utilize their time at home. It also allowed students to take up part-time jobs, study English, prepare for certificates related to future job prospects etc. while taking online classes through the universities. Similar findings were identified in a study by Choi et al. (2020); their research concluding that students were more satisfied with online learning when different learning options were available. Accordingly, it is recommended that future educators and scholars consider the possibility of offering students a course that matches the needs of different students during the pandemic period (Tuna & Başdal, 2021). For example, a lecturer could offer a ‘real-time’ class to students that is recorded. Students unable to attend the class should be allowed to watch the recording without being penalized for missing the live class. Alternatively, a lecturer could record their class and offer the designated class time to have live discussions with students in smaller groups.

Within this research, an assessment of various messaging tools was considered. The communication tools applied between students and faculty during non-class times included social network services such as E-CLASS (intra-network system called groupware), and Kakao Talk (free mobile messenger application) mainly for all students. Supplementary technology incorporated to enhance the educator/learner relationship included more traditional technologies such as e-mail and cell phone text message, which provided for personal interaction between the educators and learners. A closer inspection of the communication technology found that instant messaging apps were considered more popular than traditional messaging tools. In particular, Kakao Talk and WhatsApp were deemed to satisfy students the most. It seems that, while some students enjoyed the freedom of not having to attend class, most students appreciated a regular level of contact with their lecturers. The two instant messaging apps also gave students an opportunity to form groups on the apps and communicate with one another as well as with the lecturer in real-time. Gross and Manoharan (2016), in a study related to the vocational nature of tourism found that in higher education, tourism related classes continue to be practical, leading students to rely on interactive and readily available support from lecturers and other group members. It therefore seems that some classroom advances would require more communication between faculty members and students on a more personal level despite the current trend which is concentrated on a less personal online learning experience.

Towards the end of the focus group, students were encouraged to express any issues they experienced with the online learning process (Bao, 2020). While some students championed the idea of more diverse online education tools; technology improvement and better teaching methods to online techniques incorporated by educators were listed as issues. Participants also noted that lecturers needed to have a greater understanding of the problems that students faced in online learning. Within this spectrum, issues with slow internet connection, or the sending and receiving of information during online classes were noted as areas that could be improved (Cao et al., 2020). From the study it is therefore recommended that universities introduce greater mechanisms for enhancing blended learning while addressing technology problems to encourage class quality (Jowsey et al., 2020). A move towards blended learning would give certain students an additional avenue with which to participate in class; especially if this hybrid style of learning is not compulsory (Gössling et al., 2020). This would allow learners to operate in smaller groups at the university, where issues related to internet connection are almost nonexistent (Cho & Schmelzer, 2000). With regards to student concerns about the quality of online classes conducted by certain lecturers, several recommendations are presented. One option it to encourage lecturer (teacher) workshops (Tuna & Başdal, 2021). These projects provide lecturers with intimate knowledge to assist in building competencies to manage online classes more effectively. Also, some universities have acquired the assistance of outsourced firms to contribute their expertise to the learning process by facilitating lecturers during their classes (Bluc et al., 2007). Finally, universities are encouraged to provide lecturers with additional time with which to prepare for classes (Cho & Schmelzer, 2000). The additional pressure inflicted upon educators could have negative consequences on the overall class experience (Bao, 2020). Universities are also encouraged to support these educators with quality technology with which to conduct their classes (Burke, 2020).

As a closing point on a rather important topic, this study assumes that to improve the quality of online courses, universities might choose to open greater levels of dialogue between students and other stakeholders, and thus encouraging the acceptance of students’ suggestions. Moving classes completely online requires a sacrifice and commitment from all stakeholders involved in the process (Wang et al., 2020). For university administrative departments, new policies and processes need to be developed to satisfy the requirements of individuals and organizations associated with the university. From the educator’s point of view, new lesson plans and teaching materials need to be designed as classes move online. The lack of experience in these matters with regards to support systems, preparation, and educational technology teams has created major inefficiencies in the education system (Bao, 2020). For example, Burke (2020) posited that online learning and teaching require skills that need to be developed in order to achieve quality improvements. This could however only be achieved through the process of collaborative communication and problem-solving between all stakeholders involved to develop learning infrastructures to support forms of blended learning. Demuyakor (2020) for example found that this was one of the major issues for Ghanaian international students in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. To a large degree, their requests to influence, or encourage positive changes to the class procedures fell on deaf ears as professors were not always willing to incorporate student input. Further, this research brings us full circle as we again deliberate on the importance of social responsibilities in the stakeholder theory by considering that an answer to the issue of online classes ultimately lies in the development of more partnerships between universities, at a domestic and international level, while also considering the importance of relationship-building between university and local society, practitioners, and more established formal institutions.
6. Limitations and future research

Due to the novelty of the current study, several limitations to the research are noted and thus, suggestions are proposed based on these shortcomings for future research to consider. The use of focus groups for example, while providing admirable qualitative information, may be better supplemented with quantitative data. Therefore, future research may choose to consider the groundwork laid by this research when drawing comparisons with less qualitative data. With regards to the above, the current research takes note of the small sample size, and with only the perceptions of students in two countries providing the basis of the research. Consequently, future research may choose to expand the sample size and scope when conducting research of a similar nature. Finally, while much of this research was limited in its focus, concerning itself mostly with the particular online delivery methods and satisfaction levels of students, future research may choose to assess the opportunity of online learning to develop students’ cultural and social skills on a worldwide scale. For example, Cho and Schmelzer (2000) mention that online learning provides opportunities for tourism and hospitality students to diversify their cultural backgrounds and improve their social skills by establishing relationships with learners across the globe, all while improving their computer competency skills.

Author statement

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Acknowledgement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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