Journalism Students Attitudes towards Online Learning During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: One of the global challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed, is the transition to an online learning format. The goal of this research is to show the results of study, how effective online learning was during the corona pandemics. The research was conducted in 8 Journalism schools of Georgian Universities and on the whole, 174 students participated. This representative study included 3 state and 5 private universities and quota selection was carried out - 22 students participated from each university. This survey was conducted using Google forms from 20 August 2021 till 20 December 2021. The main research questions were: how effective is online learning? what are the advantages and the disadvantages of full online learning? And would you like to use online learning after the end of pandemic? As the research revealed, a large number of students negatively evaluate online learning, especially in practical journalism courses, and prefer face-to-face learning.

Keywords: Online Learning, Higher Journalism Education, Georgia, COVID-19 Pandemic, Students Attitudes

Introduction

The modern higher media education is hard to imagine without the use of digital technologies, but in the conditions of COVID-19 pandemics, a number of challenges have been posed due to the transition to completely remote format. In the early stages of the pandemics, from March 2020, when universities were closed around the world, the only solution to not interrupting the learning processes was to introduce full distance learning. "The physical closure of universities and university colleges due to COVID-19 has accelerated the digitalization of journalism teaching to a record speed" (Olsen et. al, 2022). COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adaptation of E-learning tools fully, students as well as journalism educators adopted a 'new normal pedagogy' of learning (Matsilele, 2020; Misimanga et al. 2022, Osepashvili, 2022).

The new reality for "new normal pedagogy" brought new innovative ways and methods. The main educational innovations Zoom, Google Meet and other platforms were adopted during the learning processes. "Living in a box" (Fowler-Watt, K. et. all, 2020), it can be said to be a metaphor to describe online learning prosses during

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the lockdown, as well as the term "Zoomification". It has positive and negative sides as well as during the journalism higher education.

The goal of this research is to show the results of study, how effective online learning was during the corona pandemics from students' perspective.

Literature Review

There are a few numbers of studies about students' perceptions towards online learning during the COVID-19 pandemics. Most of them analyzed students both attitudes positive and negative sides of this processes. Mathew and Chung in their study about University Students' Perspectives on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Implementation Amidst COVID-19 (Mathew & Chung, 2022), conclude that university students have shown positive feelings about the overall implementation of online learning and emphasized the contributing factors – using of distance learning platforms and the asynchronous methods, which allowed students to replay the lessons at any other time needed.

Sudiapermana also emphasized his study that, the implementation of distance learning in this pandemic era has a positive value. "Online learning is actually a major breakthrough in the digital era and will become a post-pandemic new normal necessity" (Sudiapermana, 2020). In the comparative study which was conducted in 3 Countries (Spain, Italy and Ecuador), were analyzed journalism and communication teachers and students' perspectives how effective using of open innovations during pandemic learning was (Tejedor, at. all, 2021).

Koet & Aziz in systematic literature review analyzed students and teachers' perception towards distance learning during the pandemic and their perspectives were discussed from the positive and negative views about distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. As they concluded, "Recurring themes identified in the studies showed results of having varied perspectives towards distance learning due to various factors such as social, technological, and pedagogical factors." (Koet & Aziz, 2021).

Nyarko and Serwornoo described their study reflections of media students and lecturers about challenges and opportunities (Nyarko & Serwornoo, 2022). Indonesian researchers pointed out main positive values for journalism teachers and students from various regions that they can join classes "without having to worry about the distance" (Mustika & Khotimah, 2020). Unger and Meiran in their case study of Wingate university (North Carolina, USA), analyzed undergraduate student attitudes towards rapidly shifting to an entirely online learning environment which was caused by to COVID-19. "In addition, surveys on perceptions about misinformation in media, overall anxiety towards distance learning, knowledge of disease outbreak, and level of preparedness during the onset of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) 2020 outbreak were analyzed" (Unger & Meiran, 2020).

Snoussi and Radwan revealed many perceived positive and negative sides related to distance e-learning experience during the pandemic-2019 in the College of Communication; "advantages lie in enhancing students'

communication skills, saving teaching and learning in times of crisis and effective usage of multimedia as educational tools. The limits are mainly related to technical issues and computer proficiency as well as the absence of training in practical courses' (Snoussi and Radwan, 2020).

As another study suggests, "distance (online) education is not a full-fledged alternative to the traditional full-time education of journalists" (Poluekhtova at. 2020). According to the conclusion of the study "Implications for the use of Distance Online Learning in Colleges of Media and Communication: survey results", it must be emphasized that the transformation imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic, "has affected the learning process and led to an irreversible development in the education system. It seems that blended learning will become popular all over the world in the coming years considering the effects that have taken place in terms of curricula as well as a new teaching, learning, and assessment methods that suit the online environment" (Al-Mutairi et. al. 2021).

It should be noted that distance learning was not new for some countries. The hybrid model of e-learning was implemented years ago before the pandemics. Consequently, adapting to new learning platforms during the lockdown was less of a challenge for them. Before the COVID-19 pandemics, in Georgia distance learning had never been implemented due to lack of the legislation. The only experience was using of MOODLE platform for some journalism courses in Tbilisi State University and International Black Sea University. There is study which explored journalism students' and teachers' attitudes to using of Moodle platform for blended learning (Osepashvili, 2011).

In another study Georgian students' attitudes towards using Moodle and Social media usage in higher journalism education were compared (Osepashvili, 2014). The previous qualitative research "Journalism teaching practice during the COVID-19 pandemics", which were conducted in this issue in Georgia only analyzed the teachers' attitudes (Osepashvili, 2022). Until now, no one has studied and analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of pandemic learning among the Georgian journalism students. This is the first research in Georgia which studied students' attitudes towards online learning during the COVID-19 pandemics time and this is a novelty of this study.

Method

The research was conducted in 8 Journalism schools of Georgian Universities and on the whole 174 students participated. This representative study included 3 state and 5 private universities and quota selection was carried out - 22 students participated from each university. This survey was conducted by using Google Forms for an electronic questionnaire. The links of this questionnaire were emailed to selected students.

Table 1.

#	Universities:	Types:
1	IBSU/International Black Sea University	Private University
2	TSU/ Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	State University
3	GRUNI/ Grigol Robakidze University	Private University
4	ATSU/ Kutaisi Akaki Tsereteli University	State University
5	Georgian Technical University	State University
6	Caucasian International University	Private University
7	SEU/Georgian National University	Private University
8	SDASU/David Aghmashenebeli University	Private University

This survey was conducted using Google forms from 20 August 2021 till 20 December 2021. The main research questions were:

RQ1. How effective is online learning?

RQ 2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of full online learning?

RQ 3. And would you like to use online learning after the end of pandemic?

Findings and Discussion

Respondents' profile: 72 percent (n=125) of questioned journalist students were female and 28 percent (n=49) were men.

Table 2. Gender of Respondents

Gender	Percent	Number
Female	72 %	125
Male	28 %	49

Which platforms did you use for online learning at your university?
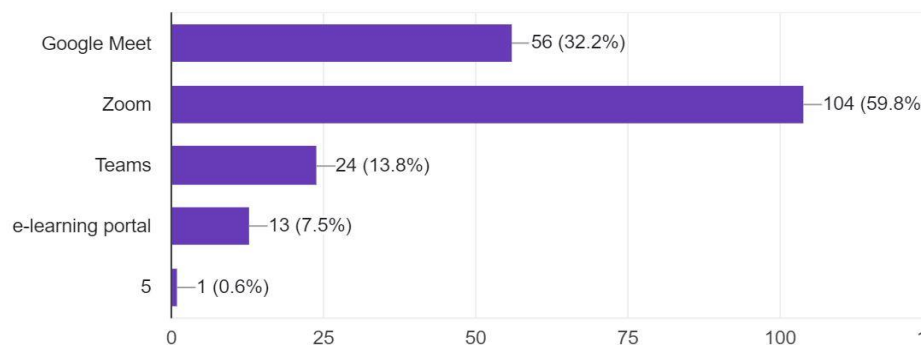
174 responses

Figure 1. Using of Platforms

Most of the questioned students use Zoom and Google Meet platforms, which are more popular than other online applications.
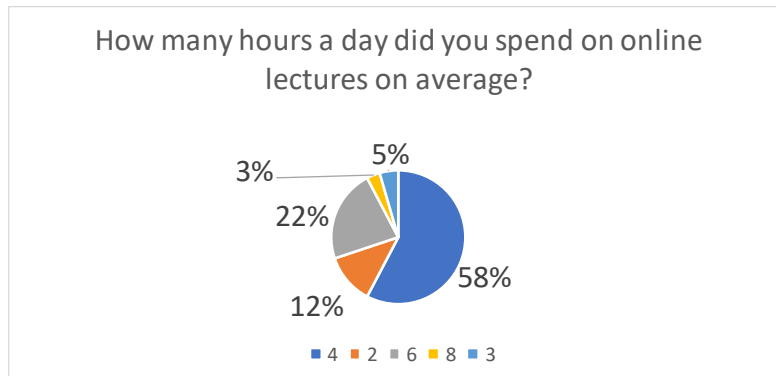

Figure 2. Frequency of Using E-Learning Platforms

In this questionnaire students were offered some advantages and disadvantages of distance learning via 5-point Likert scale.

Table 3. Advantages of Distance Learning

	Strongly Agree 1		Agree 2		Neutral 3		Disagree 4		Strongly Disagree 5		Mean
It's possible to join online classes from any place	94	54%	28	16.1%	17	9.8%	14	8%	21	12.1%	2.08
Online learning saves the time	72	41.4%	40	23%	26	14.9%	17	9.8%	19	10.9%	2.22
In parallel with the work, we were engaged in the online classes	63	36.2%	16	9.2%	24	13.8%	17	9.8%	54	31%	2.9
We can view recorded lectures any time	139	80%	26	15%	9	5%					4.3

As revealed by this research, most of the questioned students agree with the statement about advantages of distance learning, that it gives possibility of joining online classes form any place (54% strongly agreed; 16% agreed) only small number of students disagreed or strongly disagreed;

Most of the students agreed that online learning saves the time (41.4% strongly agreed 23% agreed);
36% of student-journalists strongly agreed and 9% agreed that it gives possibility of being engaged in the online lectures in parallel with their work, 10% disagreed and 31% disagreed with it.

Majority of students agreed that online learning gives them possibility of viewing recorded lectures any time (80% strongly ogreed, 15 % agreed).

As for on the open-ended question, what the advantages of online learning are, they pointed out, that it is more flexible, it is important in terms of time management and self-management.

"It's very flexible, you can save the time."

"Fully remote learning helps us to improve time management skills."

"The only positive side is that we are less at risk of getting infected with COVID-19 because online lectures are safe, although this is not a guarantee of avoiding infection."

They also save money because they don't need to use transport; They emphasized that they could view the recording of the lectures at any time, which is the main plus to mastered the use of online platforms more fully.

"I did not spend money and time on transport and this is a very significant factor for me, it helps us save money and reduce costs."

"The lecture is recorded and you can always listen to the topic which was unclear."

"First, it allows to manage time better. Also, we are fully engrossed in the full use of online learning platforms."

"As for advantages, in addition I would like to mention the use of smartphones in the learning process. We often have to take a TV story or photo with these tools in practical journalism courses."

In the open-ended question another advantage of distance learning for students was also revealed, that their professors often had a chance to invite a guest speaker during the online lectures. This rarely happened while the face-to-face classes.

Table 4. Disadvantages of Distance Learning

	Strongly Agree 1		Agree 2		Neutral 3		Disagree 4		Strongly Disagree 5		Mean
Sometimes there are some technical problems	61	35.1%	60	34.5%	29	16.7%	16	9.2%	8	4.6%	2.13
Sometimes it's boring and exhausting	62	35.6%	38	21.8%	44	25.3%	15	8.6%	15	8.6%	2.32
Studying journalism practical courses are not effective	101	58%	33	19%	15	8.6%	10	5.7%	15	8.6%	1.87
It's difficult to concentrate fully	62	35.6%	49	28.2%	28	13.2%	19	10.9%	21	12.1%	2.44
It's less interactive	73	42%	32	18.4%	38	21.8%	12	6.9%	19	10.9%	1.84

This table shows the challenges of distance learning from students' perspectives. Most of the questioned respondents agreed about some technical problems (35% strongly agreed, 34.5% agreed);

35.6% of students strongly agreed and 21.8% agreed that full distance learning is sometimes boring and exhausting. Majority of students agreed that studying journalism practical courses are not effective 58% strongly agreed and 19 % agreed. Most of the students agreed, that it's difficult to concentrate fully during the online lectures or seminars - 36% strongly agreed, 28% agreed with this.

Also, most of the questioned students agreed with that, it's a less interactive process - 42% strongly agreed and 18.4% agreed with this statement. As for the open-ended question, what the disadvantages of online learning are, the students pointed out, that it is the lack of social communication.

> "Making new friends in this mode is very difficult, in fact, impossible. Some people don't have the camera on, so I cannot see their faces and expressions. It all creates an emotionless environment, which is very uncomfortable…'
>
> "There is no face-to-face communication, which leads to isolation, isolation from society…'
>
> "It is especially negative for journalism major students, because unlike other majors, journalism cannot be studied online, let alone practical courses."
>
> "We do not have the opportunity to interact with future colleagues, to have practical knowledge, to be highly social, to be engage in lively discussions, to have the honor of meeting lecturers personally. After all, very often there are technical interruptions, which makes it even more difficult to get a quality education. I want to feel like a student and I don't want to waste my resources."

Some of the questioned students emphasized the challenges of practical courses, like TV production or multimedia journalism. Learning processes these courses were difficult because they didn't have an opportunity to meet respondents and use TV cameras.

> "Practice is something that is hard to get online. Conventionally, I had a subject where I had to edit a video in the program, which is very difficult to teach online to students. In addition, I had a problem with this practical subject, because I had to learn to work on a computer that should be powerful and stable. I didn't have one, the university didn't offer me either. Therefore, I didn't study a lot throughout the semester. I want to say that a teaching practical subject online is very difficult. At this time, it is even better to have a mentor close to you and who will give you instructions."

Some students also mentioned one more challenge, which it was difficult for them to meet with information sources and take interviews. They started using innovative ways – Zoom or Google Meet interviews – but this challenge has become a new opportunity and therefore a strength:

> "At first, it was really difficult because we needed to meet the sources for the practical subject courses, but we could not because of the lockdown. Since we started recording interviews via Zoom, I like it so much, it would be good if we kept this form even after pandemic teaching."

The questionnaire was finished with one more Likert scale question whose aim was to evaluate how effective online learning process was on the whole.

Table 5. Effectiveness of Online Learning

	Strongly Agree 1		Agree 2		Neutral 3		Disagree 4		Strongly Disagree 5		Mean
On the whole, online learning is effective	10	5.7%	21	12.2%	46	26.4%	51	29.3%	46	26.4%	3.6

Majority of the questioned students disagreed with statement that on the whole online learning was effective. 29% disagreed and 26% strongly disagreed it. Only small number of respondents agreed about the effectiveness of remote learning process (6% strongly agreed and 12 % agreed).
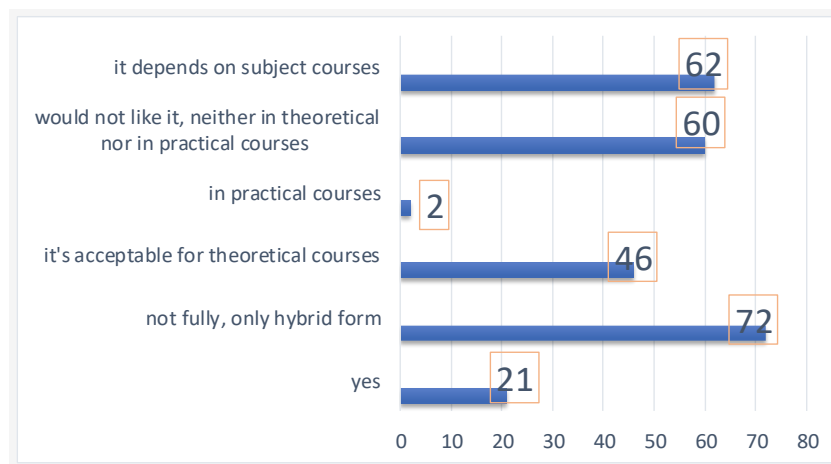

Figure 3. Would You Like to Use Distance Learning After the Pandemics

According to the results of this last question, after pandemic only 12 percent (n=21) of journalism students would like to use remote learning;

- ❏ 35% think that it depends on subject courses;
- ❏ 41% think that it would be great if learning process was a hybrid form;
- ❏ 26% think that online learning is acceptable for theoretical courses.
- ❏ 2% think that online learning is acceptable in practical journalism courses.
- ❏ 34% believe that they would like it neither in theoretical nor practical courses.

Conclusion

According to the results of this study, it should be concluded that for most of the Georgian journalism students fully remote learning was the only alternative during the COVID-19 pandemics. It was a solution to this global

challenge, which COVID-19 posed in educational sector, in order to cope with these difficulties in the "new normality". If we compare the results of previous study which was conducted among Georgian journalism teachers (Osepashvili, 2022), the same was emphasized in students' attitudes too, that it was a teaching during crisis time.

If were compare the results of this research with other studies which were conducted years ago among Georgian students (Osepashvili, 2011; Osepashvili, 2014) about using blended e-learning methods based on MOODLE platform in higher journalism education, the same was revealed during the pandemics, that "modern media education cannot be imagined without technologies and without e-learning methods" (Osepashvili, 2011) and blended learning is very important in teaching journalism subject courses. According to the results of this study, majority of questioned students disagreed with the statement that on the whole online learning was effective. 29% disagreed and 26% strongly disagreed with it. Only small number of respondents agreed that remote learning process effective (6% strongly agreed and 12 % agreed).

In the first research questions the strengths and advantages of distance learning were analyzed. It gives them opportunity to stay safely at home or at work and due to flexibility of this process, join the synchronized lectures from any place; listen to recorded lectures any time; save the money and time; improve the time management and self-management skills.

In the second research questions disadvantages of distance learning were analyzed that it is less interactive, sometimes it is related to technical problems with internet connection; there is less social communication; it is difficult to learn journalism practical subject courses fully online.

In the third research questions were revealed that after the COVID-19 pandemics only 12% would like to use remote learning and 41% of questioned students think it would be great if hybrid model was implemented after the end of pandemics but only for some theoretical subject courses because practice-based courses like TV or Multimedia production is unimaginable to teach effectively in case of remote classes.

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