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College Students' Views on the Pandemic Distance Education: A Focus Group Discussion

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Abstract

The COVID-19 is a deadly pandemic that has affected every aspect of life including education. The schools have been closed to prevent the spread of the virus, and they have converted their system into distance education. Completing the semester there is a need to address the problematic issues in the new system to develop it for future implementations. Thus the current research aimed to examine the perceptions of Turkish university students on the pandemic distance education period. In particular, this research addressed the following research questions: (1) How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your life in general? (2) What do you think about web-based pandemic education that you have? (3) What are your suggestions on future distance education implementations? It was conducted by focus group discussion. The researcher carried out the discussion via Skype one of the best ways in pandemic period. The 12 undergraduates were determined randomly and voluntarily from each grade. A number of issues that were obtained from the discussion were identified through qualitative content analysis. The findings have revealed that most of the participants were affected by the pandemic period negatively feeling anxiety, despair, and boredom. It is apparent from the findings of the second research question that pandemic education process has had its weaknesses rather than its advantages such as lack of interaction, and communication which lead the students to isolation, problems about exams, traditional educational habits, the load of assignments, and time management. The advantages on the other hand have been flexibility of time and place, students' having more responsibilities in learning and comfort in exams. The suggestions of the participants are also worth to note like instructors' changing their way of lecturing, their perspectives as educators, and the way of assessment. It is hoped to contribute to the current distance education literature with its worthwhile results.

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic has paralyzed nearly every way of life all over the world, and its effects are still unclear. Most countries have been asked to stay at home to save their lives (UNESCO, 2020). This deadly pandemic has also affected education systems severely. Daniel (2020) indicated that education which has grown up considerably at all levels for 50 years has its greatest challenge so far. Therefore, the schools have been closed in many countries to combat the spread of the virus, and %90 of students could not attend their schools in the world (UNESCO, 2020). The reason for the closure of schools is to provide safety of students creating social distance and preventing social interactions among people recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). As Murphy (2020) stated schools have been threats to *securitization* at the time of COVID-19 pandemic. Like many governments, The Turkish Government also ordered to cancel face to face instruction, and the Council of Higher Education (COHE) in Turkey has determined to convert to the system into an online or distance education one. Besides in-person instruction activities other collective academic activities such as symposiums and conferences have also been canceled. The Council brought about a declaration on COVID-19 Pandemic and sent it to the universities liberating them in terms of implementation fundamentals (COHE, 2020). Thus, every university senate has determined its own principles.

Distance or online education which is a dramatic shift from traditional in-person instruction at the time of pandemic is not a fresh concept for higher education in Turkey. Since 2014 upon the decision of COHE most of the universities in Turkey have been conducted some of their classes by distance education. Statistics have revealed that 78 institutes of higher education have already had distance education programs in Turkey (COHE, 2017). So Turkish students are no stranger to the education conducted in digital classrooms, and they are more ready to turn to distance or online education. However, Ural (2007) asserted that some of the campus-based

universities of Turkey have limited applications for distance education to deal with the high student population problem not to enhance learning, and create benefits for students. Kennedy claimed that American higher education institutions whose students more likely to have the devices to access to the internet are more convenient to transform into distance education than the primary or secondary education (2020, p.16). However, in Turkey, not a majority of students have the chance to access the internet easily. So, most of the university senates have determined to conduct the lectures asynchronously. Asynchronous learning ‘gives teachers and students more room to breathe’ which means teachers and students do not have to obey strict timetables instead, they are free to use digital platforms to exchange materials (Daniel, 2020). According to Daniel (2020), institutions should provide various conditions to support the students whose home environments are not convenient to study. Owing to the fact that parents may be anxious about their economic future and they may lack the proper equipment, which prevents students join the synchronous classes. Moreover, asynchronous learning gives teachers the opportunity of being flexible for preparing course materials, and students being comfortable at home and study at any time.

Thanks to those solutions for the pandemic crisis, the spring term has been carried out with several educational consequences. Such platforms which are just emergency alternatives of course do not replace live education. As Belz (2020, p.1) stated ‘a virtual teacher with all the limitations is better than no teacher at all’. Several difficulties have been experienced during pandemic teaching, for students and teachers (Atreya & Acharya, 2020, p.2). By this means there is a need to address the problematic issues which students have throughout the pandemic period attending distant classes. Determining the weaknesses and the strengths of the pandemic distance education, educators may specify convenient methods and techniques for the following terms. Consequently, the present study has aimed to explore the opinions of Turkish students about the pandemic education period, and it is hoped to contribute to the field with valuable results. In this way the current study will display distant education issues with its synchronic and asynchronic versions to highlight the strengths and weaknesses.

Distance Education

Web-based distance education is a relatively new form of teaching which requires new technologies. It is a favourite format in educational settings due to its flexibility and adaptability to students’ needs (Allen & Seaman, 2016). It delivers teaching and learning using some tools across far distances (Groff, 1996; Xu & Xu, 2019). One of the primary aims of traditional in-person instruction is to provide learners with necessary knowledge and skills, which is also valid for distance education (Girginer, 2002). Distance education has been the only solution for higher education to enhance access to education for students who have no chance to attend traditional classes in the pandemic period. Thanks to the advances in technology, online education has become the primal system among other distance education formats such as telecommunication courses, and correspondence study (Xu & Xu, 2019). Although its being helpful in the pandemic period some forms of distance education lack interaction between students and instructors which has been very problematic. In the present distance education case as Offir, Lev, and Bezalel (2008) stated students have been required to be independent learners much more than the traditional system. Undergraduates are adults and, they are expected to be independent students as defined by Titmus (1989). So distance education may be a useful practice for students who are independent learners. However, students are not independent enough to utilize distance education properly even in the Ph.D. level (Ural, 2007). So they need interaction and to be directed by their instructors as in the traditional system.

Jarvis (2003) stated that internet-based distance education has two forms: synchronous and asynchronous which provide organized technological opportunities to students who study individually. In synchronous distance learning, all of the attendants participate in digital classes in real time, which required two-way communication (Tsipianitis & Groumos, 2018, p. 346). In this system, teachers lead the learning and participants communicate with one another directly, so it increases student involvement (Shi & Morrow, 2006). Students’ interactivity accompanies effective learning and satisfaction (Stephens & Mottet, 2008). According to Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, Wozney, Wallet, Fiset, & Huang (2004) in synchronous learning students and instructors are away physically but communicating immediately as in video conferencing method. In the synchronous form of distance learning students receive immediate feedback (Almosa & Almobaraka, 2005), and also this form of learning provides ‘social presence’ more than the asynchronous form (Münzer, 2003). It has been known for decades that Social Presence Theory which was first presented by its ancestors Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) has been one of the effective theories to support interaction through online learning (Dahlstorm-Hakki, Alstad & Banerjee, 2020). It is a fact that college classrooms are the places where the social and academic needs of students are fulfilled by interrogating the effect of social presence and other educational activities in it (Tinto,

1993). It affects interaction and communication among individuals (Short, et al., 1976, p.65) in online educational settings as well. While the synchronous form of distance education provides quiet interactive learning environments with real-time knowledge sharing and immediate access to the answers of the questions in mind, fixed date and time for the meeting which contradicts the ‘anywhere-anytime’ learning promise of distance education (Skylar, 2009).

In asynchronous distance learning, on the other hand, students and instructors do not have to participate in the learning event simultaneously. Instead, students who are given more control over their learning can learn anywhere, and anytime (Tsiipianitis & Groumpos, 2018, p. 346). Bernard et al. (2004) also indicated that the communication between students and instructors is separated by distance and time as in web-based courses. In this kind of learning instructors do not have to follow strict time schedules instead, they can post their course materials by wikis, blogs, and e-mail. They can arrange online appointments in case of student need (Daniel, 2020). Thus, group interactions among students are limited in this kind of learning.

Bernard et al. (2004) compared the two systems of distance education in their meta-analysis research. They compare both synchronous and asynchronous distance education forms to traditional classroom instruction. Their findings are remarkable. While students’ achievement is significantly higher, and students’ attitudes are more positive in asynchronous form; retention is significantly higher in traditional classroom education. Roblyer, Freeman, Donaldson, and Maddox (2007) also had their notable results in comparing synchronous and asynchronous formats. They did not find any clear significance in favor of both formats in terms of students’ achievement and their attitudes towards them. When asked about the access to the teacher, a majority of students complain about the present issue comparing it to the traditional classroom instruction. Nearly half of the students in the research indicated that virtual courses are more difficult and present more challenges than traditional ones. When teachers evaluated the virtual courses in the same research they noted that the virtual process increases their experience with technology but they added that student attention, enjoyment, and interaction do not get higher. Lastly, nearly all of the teacher participants agreed on the virtual classes make high-quality courses available to several students and achieve its aims in this way. Skylar (2009) compared two systems in her study and reached worthy outcomes. The researcher did not find any significant difference between synchronous web-based instruction and asynchronous text-based instruction in terms of students’ academic performance. As for satisfaction, students indicated that they would prefer synchronous lectures rather than asynchronous ones, due to the fact that students understood better in synchronous lectures. Cleveland-Innes, and Ally (2004) tested two delivery forms for affective learning outcomes. The researchers discussed the interaction among students in terms of being flexible or not. Participants found asynchronous learning platforms more convenient. It is due to they have more time to reflect on their learning while the synchronous platform requires joining the interactive classes in time which is sometimes very difficult. They claimed that in asynchronous learning environments interaction among students is more flexible. In other words, students can interact with one another whenever and wherever they like. On the other hand, asynchronous learning platforms create a sense of disconnection between students and teachers due to the lack of social interactions and feedback (Branon & Essex, 2001; Hines & Pearl, 2004). When compared synchronous distance education to asynchronous one, the former is claimed to improve students’ brainstorming and group decision-making skills (Branon & Essex, 2001). Being synchronous or asynchronous distance education has its importance nowadays especially in the pandemic period. Thus understanding the students’ perception and attitudes towards the pandemic distance education period has a great impact on improving it for the future.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

In the introduction part, relevant literature has been discussed about pandemic education, distance education, its types, and advantages and disadvantages. The opinions and perceptions of the students have a crucial effect on future implementations. There are not enough studies addressing students’ perspectives towards specifically pandemic distance education period so far –by the best knowledge of the researcher. The absence of such studies led the researcher to investigate it with the aim to contribute to the field. The current research, therefore, examined the thoughts and perceptions of college students toward the issue through a qualitative approach. Thus, the present study addressed the following research questions:

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your life in general?
2. What do you think about web-based pandemic education that you have?
 - a. What are the advantages of web-based education?
 - b. What are the disadvantages of web-based education?
3. What are your suggestions on future distance education implementations?

Method

Qualitative social research is conducted to give suggestions to the audience on how to do better and how to have better services concerning the similar experiences, problems, and thoughts of others (Silverman, 2010). In this kind of studies, the focus is primarily on experiences and reflections of people (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research addresses social problems and affects the practitioners' practice providing detailed descriptions of the case and allowing them to make inferences about their own lives (Bloor, 2016). The methodological approach taken in this study is a qualitative one based on the perceptions about qualitative studies. Data were collected using focus group discussion technique. Focus group discussions are used to understand the factors related to students' thoughts and behavior (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Moreover, in focus group discussions unlike personal interviews, participants can think aloud and feel free to say what they think, discuss with the others about counter-arguments, and change their opinions as the discussion proceed like in informal life settings (Lauri, 2019). The information obtained from focus group discussions is deeper than face to face interviews because of the social interaction among the participants (Thomas, MacMillan, McRoll, Hale & Bond, 1995).

Trustworthiness of the Research

Guba (1981), one of the authority figures in the field, listed four criteria to be met to provide trustworthiness of a qualitative investigation which are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria endeavored to be met in the present research will be explained in detail.

Credibility

Credibility is one of the significant agents to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher's background and qualifications are important issues to prove credibility (Shenton, 2004). The researcher of this study is an academic having several qualitative research methods. Therefore, she is aware of the importance of credibility in qualitative research. Random sampling is another factor to affect trustworthiness of the research (Bouma & Atkinson, 1985). In the current research, the participants were chosen randomly and voluntarily to prove honesty in participants. Shenton (2004) indicated that participants should have given the chance to refuse to attend the study.

Member-check is the following factor to increase the credibility of the research and it was likened to the 'heart of credibility' by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Therefore, the researcher shared the findings of the present study to the participants, and let them suggest changes if they are not contented with the interpretation made by her. Giving direct quotations is the last factor to ensure credibility as Shenton (2004) indicated using real episodes lets the readers believes in the research. Thus to enable the readers understand the findings direct excerpts were given.

Transferability

Transferability means that the results of qualitative research can generalize to the other similar contexts. It can be achieved through a 'thick description' (Bitsch, 2005) which means the researcher clarifies all the process to let the reader to compare the context to the others (Guba, 1981). Hence, the researcher explicated the process in detail. However, as Shenton (2004) claimed that findings of a small sample of participants cannot be generalized to the other populations and situations. So the reader should bear in mind that the study may not be applied to the other populations with similar results due to the case of the country (Turkey) and some implementation ways of distance education peculiar to the university that the research was conducted in.

Dependability

Dependability is 'the stability of findings over time' (Bitsch, 2005, p.86). To ensure this factor, the researcher utilized the code-decode technique as Chilisa and Preece (2005) suggested. In this technique, the researcher codes the same data twice. A waiting period should be given between two coding and then the results should be compared to see if there is a difference between them (Chilisa & Preece, 2005). Therefore, the researcher waited

for two weeks between each coding and adopted the findings accordingly to ensure dependability of the current study.

Confirmability

Confirmability means the results of the research can be confirmed by other researchers (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). So, to ensure objectivity the researcher asked an academic of Education Faculty to read the transcriptions and confirm the codes. The Skype record is preserved to provide confirmability as well.

Participants

Participants of the research were 12 undergraduates chosen among each of the grades (from 1 to 4). In other words, three students were chosen from each grade to focus on a given topic. The participants were determined randomly and according to the applicability concept. Burrows and Kendall (1997) noted that participants are selected due to their knowledge area. As a matter of fact, all the students are within the criteria of the research because they have attended the web-based courses through three months and they have had enough knowledge to comment on it. Therefore, the researcher announced that she would conduct the research indicating the content of it, and she asked the volunteer ones to participate in the focus group discussions. Three students from each grade accepted to attend the online meeting voluntarily. Seven of the participants were male and the others were female. Their ages were between 20-25. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the students' gender and age among classes.

Table 1. The Demographic Features of the Participants

Participants	Male	Female	Age
1 st grade	2	1	20-22
2 nd grade	2	1	21-23
3 rd grade	2	1	23-24
4 th grade	1	2	23-25

Data Collection Procedure

The study was conducted in the form of a qualitative research with data being gathered via focus group discussion technique. Focus group discussion technique had a number of attractive features for the pandemic process. The first one is its being practical to be conducted online. Thus, as an internet software application, 'Skype' was utilized to carry out the discussion. The second one is its being convenient for the researcher as a moderator, because, she is an academic and has given lectures throughout the pandemic process so she was also aware of the topic and could facilitate the discussions easily. The last one is that the participants were familiar with one another since most of them were attending the same classes and all of them attended department meetings. Therefore, they engaged in discussions feeling comfortable as Kitzinger (1994) suggested that being familiar with one another is advantageous for the trust among them.

Upon the recommendations of Krueger (1998), semi-structured questions were prepared by the researcher aiming to identify the thoughts of students about the pandemic distance education. The questions were revised by two academics of education faculty. After making some minor changes, the questions of the discussion were ready to use. The researcher was the moderator and her master's degree student was her assistant (observer) who directed her when necessary and took notes during the session. The focus group discussion was recorded with the permission of the students. Before dealing with the major questions the moderator asked some opening and introductory questions to let the group feel connected. After introducing themselves and telling how they felt of COVID-19 the participants expressed their opinions about the education process and then they were asked to share ideas for future distance education implementations. During the focus group session, the moderator asked the research questions in the same order but asked some side questions to have more information about the topic. The moderator tried to create a flexible atmosphere to make students discuss among themselves comfortably. The discussion took 2 hours. After the session, the moderator read the notes of the observer and transcribed the recordings. To ensure reliability the researcher re-coded the same data after two weeks.

Data Analysis

Data obtained from the Skype meeting were analyzed through qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is a way to classify the text obtained from interviews into categories that represent similar meanings (Weber, 1990). Therefore, similar codes were brought together into the main categories. Two professors of the field confirmed the codes constitutes by the researcher to ensure uniformity. Some minor changes were made upon the recommendations of the academics.

To protect the privacy of the participants, codes were used to report statements such as 1F1 and 2M1. These codes represented first grade first female student and second grade first male student.

Findings

Analysis of data revealed the opinions of the participants about the COVID-19 pandemic, distance education during the pandemic process, and suggestions for the future distance education implementations. The results of each research question were displayed below.

How Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Your Life?

Findings related to the first research question resulted in the categories and codes given in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' views about COVID-19

General Categories	Codes	F
Anxiety	Fear of getting infected	10
	Fear of losing relatives	9
Despair	Economic issues	7
	Uncertainty for Future	6
	Losing life satisfaction	4
Boredom	Lacking social activities	9
	Lacking occupation	6
Neutral	No change of life	2

Table 2 presents three categories, and seven codes within these general categories for the first research question. Examining the answers, the researcher determined the first category as 'anxiety'. Students anxious about COVID-19 indicated that they have fear of getting infected (F=10), and losing their relatives (F=9). 1M1 declared that *'quarantine is an unpleasant experience for me and my parents. The loss of freedom and boredom affected my psychology negatively and I have some anxieties such as getting infected and dying breathless and losing my family because of this disease.'* 2M1 noted that *'I am traumatized by losing my father and mother because of this infectious disease'*. The next category is related to despair students have due to pandemic. The participants in this category reported their being hopeless on economic issues (F=7), their future (F=6), and their life satisfaction (F=4). 3M1 told his case in this respect as *'we do not have the economic ability to withstand without earning money...'* 3F1 also declared that *'the loss of income is our nightmare'*. 4F1 remarked that *'I am no longer sure about my future, I am in the last grade and not sure to find a good job'*. 2F1 also stated her being hopeless about the future as *'I had dreams about future but I do not have any more...'* 3M1 declared that *'I feel being vulnerable to this infectious disease and have lost the joy of life...'* The other category is 'boredom' students have in this period. The participants (F=9) declared they lack social activities as a result of social distancing. 2M1 told that *'We have been altogether in the campus, in break times, and in the evenings as well having good time together. However now, we are afraid to be infected and we have some restrictions. So I feel isolated and lonely and I got bored so much'*. Some of the participants (F=6) declared that they cannot find anything to do at home except from studying, watching TV, or reading which leads them to be bored. 3M2 stated that *'I get up late and have a late breakfast and watch the news about pandemic, I sometimes read but to be honest I do not want to read so much. I lost my joy of life and I do not want to do anything. I know I should find something to occupy myself not to think about pandemic but I cannot. So I got bored and do nothing...'* Two of the respondents stated that there is no change in their lives due to the pandemic as they have been living similarly.

What Do You Think about the Web-based Pandemic Education that You Have?

Asking the participants about their asynchronous pandemic education experience, two general categories, and nine codes were attained. The categories, codes, and their frequencies were given in Table 3.

Table 3. Students' Views about Pandemic Education

General Categories	Codes	F
Disadvantages of pandemic education	Problems related to lack of interaction	11
	Difficulties in communicating the instructors	9
	Problems related to exams	8
	Being stick to traditional educational habits	7
	A load of assignments	6
	Time management	4
Advantages of pandemic education	Flexibility of time and place	10
	Having more responsibilities in learning	5
	Comfort in exams	4
Total		63

Within the framework of the first category 'disadvantages of pandemic education', four codes were identified. Nearly all of the participants (F=11) declared that they had several problems related to lack of interaction between their instructors and themselves during the web-based classes. 1F1 stated '*I do not comprehend the lectures without asking something to the instructor. I frequently need explanations in detail while watching the videos. However, I cannot ask any questions due to lectures' being asynchronous and instructors' lecturing as if every student has the same learning ability and background.*' 3F1 stated in the same vein that '*I miss my face to face classes. Since I can understand better having interaction with my instructor and my friends. Even the instructor asks something to one of my friends in the class I can learn in this way. However, in this kind of education the instructors just read their notes which are so hard to understand*'. Nine of the participants remarked that they have some problems communicating to the instructors. 3M2 told '*whenever I send e-mails to one of the instructors I never receive feedback*' and 4F2 also remarked that '*I need to ask something to the instructor related to her classes. However, I never receive the answers to my questions. She just goes on lecturing her classes asynchronously.*' Most of the participants (F= 8) declared that they had some problems related to the online and assignment exams. 3M2 said that '*I had lower grades than traditional in-classroom exams. That's why I do not like assignment exams. Instructors regard in details more than in classroom exams.*' 1M2 also stated that '*instructors asked what they have not lectured in their web-based classes, so we have difficulties to cope with online exams. Moreover, English Language and Literature subjects are not suitable for multiple-choice test exams. We used to write essays in the exams so, most of us could not be successful*'. Some of the participants (F=9) noted to have some problems about their habits on teacher-centered system. They emphasized that distance education requires student-centeredness that they have not been accustomed to so far. 3M2 indicated '*We need to be directed by the teacher because they always did it in our standard in-class education. However, in this system they just lecture and leave the rest to the students. I mean we have to search for the topics more than usual*'. 4F1 also reported that '*we have not been so active in learning before and it is difficult to adapt. I need to sit in class, take notes while the instructor teaching, and get instant feedback when I need it*'. The students (F=6) complained about the load of assignments they had through the process. 1M1 indicated '*... in the traditional system We have just one mid-term. However, in this pandemic distance education system every instructor demanded three assignments to substitute the mid-term exam. Thus we had to rush to complete the assignments before the end of the week for all of the courses*'. As for 'time management' code students (F=4) have negative opinions. They remarked that they could not manage the time as expected. 2M1 stated '*I always think that I can watch the lecturing videos later. However, 'later' hardly comes. I have so many trivial things to do at home. So I could not watch the videos in the week that they are sent.*'

As for the second category 'advantages of distance education', three codes were formed. The first code 'flexibility of time and place' was declared (F=10) by most of the participants. Commenting in this manner 2M2 expressed '*I can study according to my own schedule. So I do not have to get up early and go to school. I can watch the videos and study the documents whenever and wherever I want*'. Unlike the traditional ones in the focus group, some of the participants (F=5) declared that they like the responsibility distance education provides them. 2M1 stated '*I think traditional in-class education makes students lazy I mean it does not encourage students to learn more. However, in distance education instructor records a video of which content is just the core of the topic. So students should search for more. I like this way I like finding true information so I just need the guidance of the professors*'. The last code was 'comfort in exams' which was declared by four of the

participants. While some of the participants (F=8) thought the distance examinations are problematic somewhat a few of them (F=4) remarked that they had comfort taking exams. 4M1 told *'I got higher marks than traditional in-class exams, and I passed a course which I had never passed so far'*. 2M1 also emphasized that *'the exams are easier than the usual traditional ones. Online test exams were pretty easy, we were more comfortable at home and had more chances to check our answers. So, I like the exams most in distance education'*.

What are your Suggestions on Improving Distance Education Implementations?

Findings related to the third research question about students' recommendations on future distance education implementations were formed into three categories and eight codes given in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' Suggestions on Improving Distance Education Implementations

General Categories	Codes	F
Changing the style in lecturing	Utilizing synchronous and asynchronous lectures	10
	Providing interaction	9
Changing the style of the instructor	Being open to communicate	10
	Being tech-savvy	6
Changing the style of assessment	Having more useful assessment techniques	8
	Reducing the number of assignments	7
	Having clear assessment criteria	5
	Giving feedback	
Total		63

As seen in Table 4, in terms of the first category three codes were labeled. Participants suggesting on lecturers' changing the way of lecturing generally (F=10) indicated that not only asynchronous lectures but also synchronous ones should be utilized in the process. 4F1 emphasized the importance of synchronous lectures as *'I should feel compelled to attend the classes as I used to do so far. I and my friends do not feel like watching the videos because we do not believe in their benefit'*. 3M2 remarked similarly *'To be honest I prefer sleeping or watching films instead of watching the lecturing videos. Because there is no such a driving force in asynchronous lecturing as in traditional face to face education'*. Most of the participants (F=9) suggested having more interaction between the teacher and the students. 2M2 drew the attention to *'I need to ask questions about what I do not comprehend enough. University education should provide it to me. I should utilize my professors' knowledge. So I can say that interaction is a prerequisite for education'*. Complaining the load of assignments participants suggested reducing the number of assignments. 1M1 specified *'...the more assignment the sloppier we do them. However, we can elaborate on the assignments if we have a few'*. There are some other suggestions on changing the style of the instructors themselves. The majority of the participants (F=10) indicated that their instructors should be open to communicate. 3M2 opined in this vein as *'When I send e-mails to my instructors I expect them to respond me back. However, they behave as if they do not have to return us which is very pathetic for a good educator. Thus in future distance education courses, I expect my instructors to communicate to us when necessary'*. 4F1 commented as *'The lectures were asynchronous, the instructors just uploaded the presentations on the system, we could not see the instructors through three months and we just read the assignments written on the system. Much as we tried to communicate to them we could not manage it. However, in the traditional system we could go to their offices and tell our problems to them. I know it is an unusual period, it is a pandemic. They can have some problems. But we also feel the same and have similar problems. Thus institutions should regulate the communication system as far as possible. Students need it'*. Half of the participants (F=6) suggested their instructors taking courses about how to use technology effectively by the institution. 2F1 stated that *'One of the instructors just sent audio files. I would like my instructors to use technology effectively because we live in the 21st century and they have to update themselves to keep pace with us'*. The third category of this research question is 'changing the style of exams. Some of the participants (F=8) indicated that pandemic distance education was problematic about online and assignment exams and they put emphasis on implementing new assessment ways. 2F1 expressed that *'I prefer having online oral exams instead of online test exams. I think they never measure the competence of students. Both our instructors and we deceive ourselves'*. The other participants (F=7) complaining the instructors not being open to display their assessment criteria suggested them being unambiguous sharing their criteria to assess them. 4F1 told that *'...when I asked the instructor the mistakes I made in the assignment she just told me that she found plagiarism in my paper. I admit I use some sources writing the paper but I wrote a works-cited page to prove that I borrow some parts*

from other sources. I should know her way to assess us. The instructors should announce their criteria clearly before the exams. If we had been in our old days, I would have gone to her office and asked to see my paper. But I could not go out to see her and explain my case to her'. In relation to the previous finding, the participants (F=5) reported that they were not given sufficient feedback to control and improve themselves. Thus they suggested for future implementations instructors to give necessary feedback on the assignment. 3M2 noted that 'we have to produce our own work in distance education. We tried to communicate to the instructors to have feedback but we could not which discouraged us. So how can we know the correct our mistakes without knowing them? I think we should receive feedback on the assignments regularly'

Discussions and Conclusion

Across the world, COVID-19 has caused significant changes in education as in every aspect of life. Authorities have determined the swift transition from face to face education to distance learning systems. The reason of these changes was to protect public health. Actually, the discussions on the extension of obligatory distance education are continuing. It is because of the possibility of the second wave of the disease in the Fall term. And yet, it is important to detect the views of the students in terms of pandemic distance education because they are the most important stakeholders affected by the system. Improving the distance education system also depends on the views of students and their needs. Thus the current study investigated the opinions of the Turkish undergraduates on the pandemic distance education to serve a model to the following emergency and normal implementations.

The present research revealed some noteworthy findings. The results of the data obtained from the focus group discussion established that the majority of the students' lives were affected by COVID-19 pandemic negatively. Participants admitted having anxiety, be hopeless, and got bored due to the pandemic process. It was indicated that public health emergency cases may cause anxiety, worry, and fear on university students (Mei, Yu, He, & Li, 2011). In the current research most of the participants stated that they had the fear of losing their relatives. In a similar vein it was found by the researchers that having relatives or acquaintances infected with COVID-19 increased the anxiety level of university students (Cao et al., 2020). Thus the anxiety, despair, and boredom affected the participants' study process throughout the COVID-19 pandemic education. It is also stated that isolation through distance education increase stress level of students (Gibbons, Mize, & Rogers, 2002).

Most of the opinions disclosed the disadvantages of pandemic education on students' learning such as lack of interaction, communication problems with the instructors, exams, assignments, time management, and traditional educational habits. In the research participants mostly complained about not having enough opportunities to ask questions to the instructors. In parallel with this finding of the study, it was found that students could not ask their questions at the time they arise so they had to wait for another contact with the teachers (Santana de Oliveira et al., 2018). O'Lawrence (2005) explained the lack of interaction issue from the perspective of teachers. He stated when teachers do not see their students' faces they cannot observe the signs of attention or inattention so they cannot react immediately. Young (1997) specified the most frequent disadvantages of distance education is the lack of interaction between instructors and learners and learners themselves. Unless interaction through collaborative activities is provided, distance education leads students to feel isolated (Cohen, 2003). Bourner and Flowers (1997) suggested increased human contact in distance education to avoid feeling isolated. Distance education causes interaction problems among students such as being superficial in communication and having no cooperative tasks (Santana de Oliveira et al., 2018). Dumford and Miller (2018) discussed the lack of communication problem from the students' perspective. They reported that faculty members have to develop course activities to share with the students so they have limited time to answer all the questions of students. Moreover, it is reported that physical and psychological distance between students and instructors may cause misunderstanding (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p.200). However, Singh (2001) supported the idea that distance education systems may improve communication both among students and between students and instructors. As for time management issue students declared to have some problems. O'Lawrence (2005) stated that distance education requires more self-discipline and time management than the traditional education. Jacob and Radhai (2016) remarked that students should have self-discipline to be successful in their online learning. In the same vein, Santane de Olivera and his friends (2018) stated that without physical guidance of teachers it is difficult for students to be disciplined in distance education process. Being stuck to traditional educational habits is the last disadvantage to be declared in the current research. According to Berge and Collins (1995) the major theory of adult learning shifted from a teacher-centered perspective to a learner-centered one. Thus Diaz (2000) declared that students' success depends upon their learning theories. In other words, if students are accustomed to constructivist education style in their traditional face to face instruction they expect the same from distance education and adapt to it easily. When they used to

learn in a constructivist way they can adapt to distance education in the same way. So this result of the current study showed the tendency of the participants toward their learning theories. Hannay and Newvine (2006) similarly reported that their participants rely on the instructor 'to feed them' instead of reading the assigned material. The other disadvantage students declared about pandemic distance education process is the load of assignments. They stated they had to do homework every week for each of the courses and they found doing them useless. Karal and Cebi (2012) found that one third of their participants commented on doing homework should be a criterion of evaluation in distance education. As for exams as a disadvantageous factor in distance education, the participants complained about having been accused of cheating and plagiarism. Scanlon and Neumann (2002) found that their participants committed online plagiarism by '*inappropriate cut and paste*'. On the other hand, participants told that they did not find the results of online test exams reliable and one of them reported as '*we just deceive ourselves*'. However, it is clear that if academic learning is achieved, in other words if such easy exams facilitate students' learning, nothing else matter (Hannay & Newvine, 2006).

On the other hand, the participants declared some advantageous sides of the pandemic distance education such as flexibility of time and place, having more responsibilities in learning, and comfort in exams. According to Wheatley and Greer (1995) one of the primary benefits of web-based distance education is students' arbitrariness of studying according to their schedule. In parallel with the findings of the current study Santana de Olivera and his friends (2018) noted that flexibility provided by distance education takes away the rigidity in traditional classroom schedules, which makes students advantageous. Smedley (2010) remarked that not only the students but also the institutions and instructors utilize the flexibility of time and place provided by the distance education. Having more responsibilities is the other advantage of it. O'Lawrence (2005) noted that the learners who are able to study on their own can utilize distance education. In the study of Hannay and Newvine (2006) students declared that exams are easier in distance education than the traditional one. Moreover, the participants of that study stated that their grades were higher in distance education comparing it to the traditional education.

The participants shared their valuable suggestions on the problematic issues. Under the category of 'changing the style of lecturing' they commented on the ways instructors utilize in lecturing. They recommended utilizing not only asynchronous lectures but also synchronous ones. They declared that they need the discipline and interaction that synchronous courses require similar to what was reported by Yamagata Lynch (2014). The other category the participants commented on is the instructors themselves as educators. They thought that educators should be open to communicate. They complained about lack of communication between the instructors and themselves and recommended them to find useful and quick ways to communicate to the students. Hara and Kling (1999) also found that lack of communication between instructors and students lead students to isolation. Yurdakul (2019) reported that unless students have feedback from their instructors their learning is incomplete. This problem is reported due to the lack of communication between instructors and students. The other issue the students recommended on is the instructors' struggling with new teaching technology. They noted that some of them just upload audio files as lectures and cannot use the LMS system effectively. Rogers (2000) remarked that faculty members should be competent in terms of technology to integrate it in higher education. Learner-centeredness is the main paradigm of higher education so to support learners being self-directed; instructors should know how to integrate technology into their courses. Li (2007) compared the students' and teachers' perceptions on e-learning, and revealed that their perceptions are not in the same vein on embracing technology. While students are more enthusiastic about utilizing technology, teachers ignore students' views somehow. They may be afraid of '*being replaced by computers*' (p. 393). The other finding of suggestions is 'reducing the number of assignments'. Assignments are taken as essential agents in distance education to control learning. Academics should propose assignments to help learners get beneficial learning experiences (Akhter & Ali, 2016). The participants of the current study also admitted the role of assignments in learning but they reported that doing so many assignments does not lead learning. On the contrary, they thought the number of assignments should be reduced to be more useful. The last finding is the participants' requirements of feedback through distance education. Providing feedback is important both to grade students and to motivate those (Young, 2000). Effective feedback is a part of distance education process and more difficult to give comparing to the traditional education settings. It may be due to the high workloads of instructors (Chetwynd & Dobby, 2011). Hara and Kling (1999) reported that students need to get constant feedback and assistance from the instructors. The participants of their research reported that they could not be satisfied by the results of the search engines instead they needed their instructors' assistance.

As a conclusion, it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic process has affected the students' lives negatively. These negative feelings have not been overcome by the education they exposed throughout the period. Whereas, in traditional campus life they would be together with their friends and professors and they would overcome the problems together through socializing. The emergency distance education system has not taken on the task to

cure students psychologically. Instead, it tried to sustain teaching. It had its weaknesses along with its strengths. The participants of the study who engaged the pandemic distance education in-person commented on it confessedly. It is thought that the findings of the current research will contribute to the field addressing the pandemic period itself, and its educational reflections. The COVID-19 pandemic period should be regarded as an opportunity for educators to consider how to push the distance education system forward. In the light of the findings above, it would be great to develop the current distance education practices which we could be sure that the future implementations obtain a strong basis.

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