

# **Evaluating Distance Learning Experience During Corona Pandemic as Perceived by Media Students in Arab Universities**

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*The main purpose of this study is to investigate and understand the experience of Communication and Media students in Arab countries toward Distance Learning. An online survey questionnaire was used to collect data and investigate students' perceptions of distance learning. A total of 494 students (293 females and 201 males) affiliated with 54 universities from 12 Arab countries participated in the survey. The findings of the study show that 25 out of 54 participating universities used at least two platforms for distance learning during the Corona pandemic. The top three platforms used by the participants were Zoom, WhatsApp, and Microsoft Teams. The majority of participants indicated that they attended both theoretical and practical courses online during the pandemic.*

*Keywords: online education, e-learning, distance learning, face-to-face education, COVID-19, Corona pandemic*

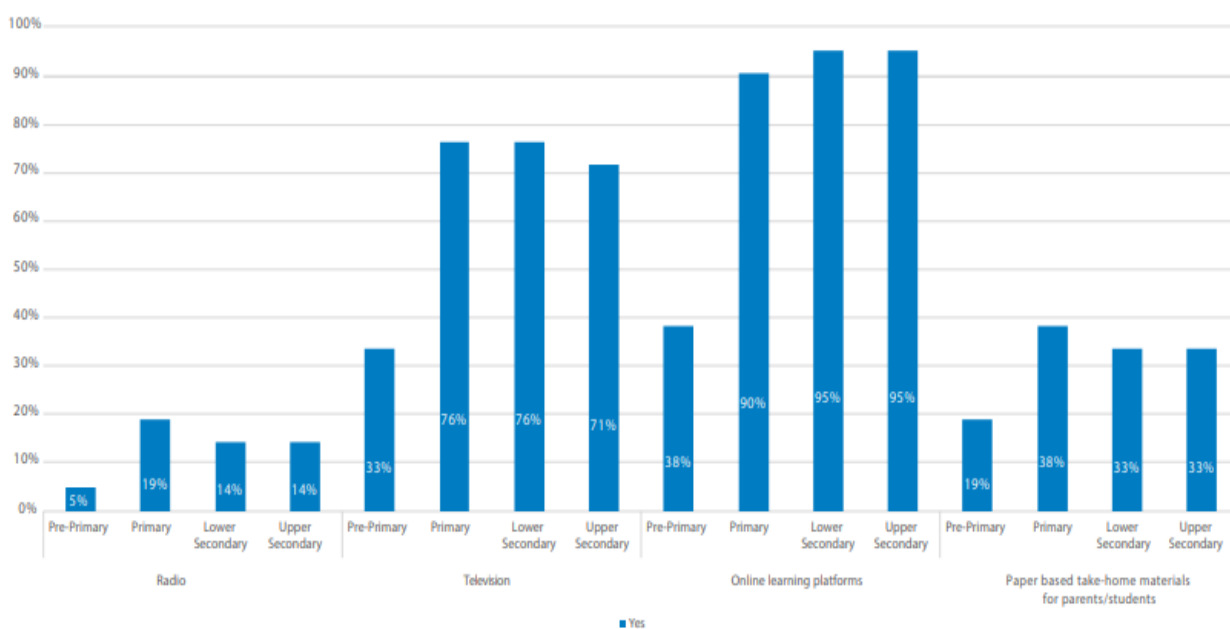
## **INTRODUCTION**

In light of the rising concerns about the spread of COVID-19 and calls to contain the coronavirus, many businesses have been affected by closure and quarantine, especially educational institutions. A survey was conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU) covering Africa, Asia, the Pacific, the USA, and Europe. The results showed that 77% of universities in Africa were closed as a precaution despite recording lower rates of the outbreak of the epidemic compared to the rest of the world, and 55% of the

universities in Asia, the Pacific, and Europe were closed. The percentage reached up to 45% for the Americas (Marinoni, 2020, 70).

All countries reacted urgently to ensure that learners would not be isolated from sources of knowledge. Some countries began educational broadcasts and programs through television. International organizations concerned with education also endeavored to provide educational resources free of charge and to provide their services via the Internet while ensuring access to information and open educational resources. Distance learning has taken different forms (Audah, 2020). Some were satisfied with television broadcasts (interactive and non-interactive), some used the radio, and others sought to integrate educational means with interactive lessons online via different educational platforms. Figure 1 shows the most important strategies that have been adopted in distance education following the suspension of face-to-face education in various countries (World Bank, 2020).

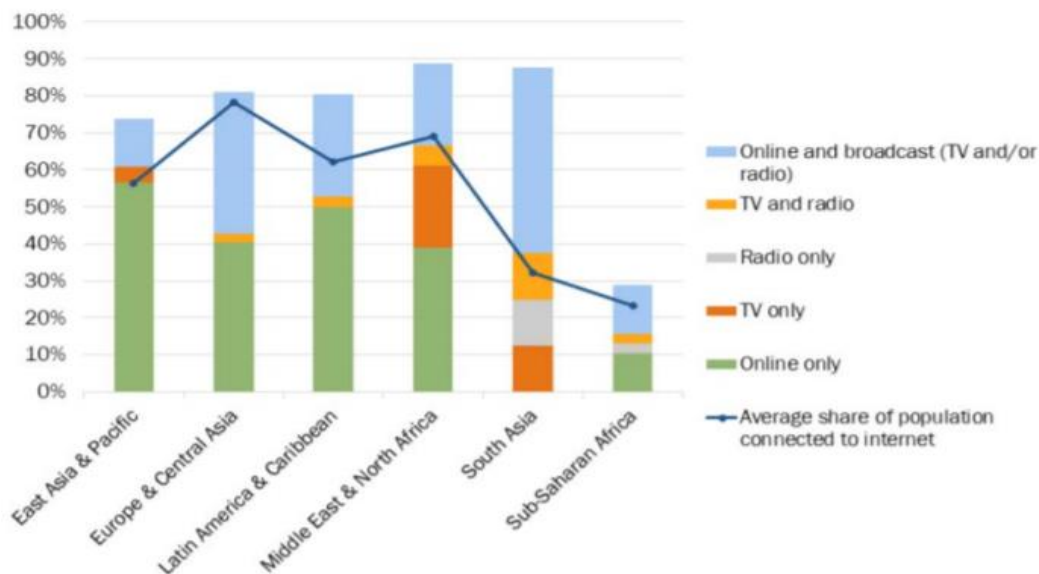
**FIGURE 1  
PRIMARY STRATEGIES ADOPTED IN DISTANCE EDUCATION**



(Source: World Bank, 2020)

Countries across the Middle East, including Arab countries, have also responded to COVID-19 by adopting a mixture of educational delivery systems to ensure continuity of learning during closures. This includes presence learning, especially for kindergarten and first grades in schools, hybrid (blended) learning, and full distance learning. The strategies used varied not only from one country to another but also from grades to grades (Figure 4), and from one educational institution to another within the same country (UNESCO, 2021). This study deals with the evaluation of the distance learning experience from the point of view of a sample of students in the faculties of communication and media in Arab universities.

**FIGURE 2**  
**TYPES OF DELIVERY SYSTEMS DEPLOYED BY EDUCATION LEVEL DURING SCHOOL CLOSURES, 2020**



(Sources: UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank survey and Johns Hopkins University tracker)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the spread of the Corona pandemic in 2019, researchers from all over the world have conducted much research to evaluate and assess distance learning during the pandemic (David et al., 2020; Badr, 2021; Olsen, 2022; Almalki, 2022). David et al. (2020) presented an interesting review of e-learning platforms on a large scale during the Corona pandemic. The authors clarified the opportunities produced by the crisis and highlighted the challenges facing distance learning. The challenges include the weakness of the data collection, the slowing down of students' progress in the formal educational curricula, and the inability of students to access the Internet.

In Georgia, a study conducted by Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) investigated the experience of moving from face-to-face education to online education during the coronavirus pandemic. Their findings confirmed that the quick transition to online education was successful and gained experience can be used in the future. The authors believed that the pandemic of 2020 will force a generation of new laws, regulations, platforms, and solutions for future cases when the countries, governments, and population will be more prepared than today.

A study by Allam et al. (2020) found that computer or internet literacy competency among undergraduate students is at a high level, whereas self-directed learning and motivation for learning are reported at a low level. The authors concluded that the implications of online learning are the concern of universities as a teaching method that is expected to improve students' academic performance by enhancing computer and Internet literacy competency, self-directed learning, and motivation for learning level.

In Egypt, Badr and Elmaghraby (2021) examined how a journalism and mass communication faculty perceive the COVID-19 impact on higher education. The authors contextualized the faculty's ambivalent perceptions within the diffusion of innovation theory. The results nuanced the debate on digital education beyond a techno-determinist focus on digital skills to encompass societal awareness of regional and culture-specific digital inequalities.

The study of Alghamdi (2021) aimed to explore and identify the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social and educational lives of Saudi university students during the period of the outbreak, which is

ongoing until the date of conducting this study in Makkah city. The SIT framework was used to help demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic affected students' lives throughout the curfew period. Aspects of online study and enhancing social interaction among students in online education were notable positive impacts on the educational lives of students throughout curfew. However, missing the classroom social environment and finding online education inadequate for practical learning were the highest reported negative impacts.

El Refae et al. (2021) reported the first experience of faculty members and students with distance learning implemented at Al Ain University (AAU) in response to the pandemic. The authors attempted to understand faculty and students' satisfaction with institutional readiness for distance learning and their perception of the opportunities and challenges of distance learning. The study concluded that although it was the first experience of fully implementing distance learning at AAU, the university succeeded in implementing distance learning with high satisfaction from faculty members and students.

Al'ahmary (2021) identified the reality of using virtual classrooms in light of the pandemic from the point of view of female students at King Khalid University, and also the challenges facing female students. The findings of the study indicated positive perceptions of participants toward online education. Olsen (2022) explored a conceptual model for unpacking value creation dynamics in journalism education. The research found that the online teaching environment was experienced as being inferior to physical teaching. Opportunities for online interaction between students and teachers were not a satisfactory substitute for physical campus teaching.

In Saudi Arabia, Almalki (2022) found that students' evaluation of the quality of distance learning at the University of Jeddah during the Corona pandemic reached a high level in all domains. There were significant statistical differences in technical support in favor of educational faculty and university administration domains as well as the electronic services and technical support domains. Similar findings are reported by Belarbi (2022) in which most of the students do not have sufficient information to follow their studies and find it difficult to deal with electronic platforms and to communicate with teachers.

Although the literature review has presented studies conducted on the assessment and evaluation of distance education during the Corona pandemic in the Arab world, we could not identify a single study based on data collected from more than 10 Arab countries. The current study could be the first study investigating the experience of media and communication students in 12 Arab countries about distance learning during the Corona pandemic. The paper contributes to enriching Arab research literature in distance education. It is an attempt to understand the experience of media and communication students in the Arab world about distance learning. The findings of the study may help deans, heads of departments, and other decision-makers take appropriate decisions about offering online and face-to-face courses for media and communication students.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The main objective of this study is to investigate the experience of online education among media and communication students in Arab countries. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the major online education platforms used by Arab universities in teaching online courses?
2. Did the students of media and communication in the Arab countries attend more semesters online than the F2F during the Corona pandemic?
3. Did the students of media and communication attend more theoretical courses online than the practical during the Corona pandemic?
4. How do the students of media and communication in the Arab countries evaluate online education in light of the Corona pandemic?
5. What are the benefits and challenges of online education perceived by the media and communication students in Arab universities?
6. Based on the experience of media and communication students in the Arab countries, what courses should be taught through online education and F2F education?

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The study adopted a descriptive survey method via an electronic questionnaire aimed at the population of students in the faculties of communication and media in Arab universities. The survey comprised three sets of questions. The first set gathered respondents' personal data such as gender, age, college, or university in which they are studying, specialization, and country. The second set included questions about distance learning in light of the Corona pandemic, the number of classes and courses that the researched student studied remotely, and the educational platforms that their college used to manage the educational process during the pandemic. The third set of questions focused on students' assessment of the distance learning experience, its pros and cons in general, and its impact on their field of specialization.

The study relied on the snowball sampling method. The link was shared by a group of professors and students of the targeted colleges who belong to groups specialized in the fields of media and communication on the social network Facebook. They were asked to share it also with their colleagues and followers, and so on. The total number of respondents reached 506. However, 12 responses were found incomplete and removed from the data. Accordingly, the study is based on data collected from 494 participants representing 54 universities from 12 Arab countries.

## **VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF THE INSTRUMENT**

### **Face Validity**

Face validity expresses the arbitrators' agreement that the tool is valid to achieve the goal for which it was prepared. To achieve this methodological requirement, the researchers presented the study's questionnaire to three arbitrators each from media professors in the Faculty of Media at Cairo University, the Faculty of Information and Communication at the University of Cairo in Algeria, and the Faculty of Mass Communication at Yarmouk University in Jordan, to ensure that its questions, themes, and formulated phrases are methodologically acceptable, and meet the objectives of the study. Some questions were deleted, some wordings were changed, and some phrases were added based on the observations and directions of the arbitrators.

### **Content Validity**

Content validity is concerned with the extent to which the content of the tool agrees with the goal for which it was designed and to ensure the validity of the content of the questionnaire before the stage of final distribution to the study sample. The correlation coefficients between the degree of each statement in the total degree of the axis and the total degree of the questionnaire were calculated by applying the questionnaire to a random exploratory sample of the study population, which amounted to 60 respondents.

### **The Participants**

A total of 494 students studying at 54 universities from 12 Arab countries participated in this study (Figure 3). The participants consisted of 293 (59.3%) females and 201 (40.7%) males. A large majority of the participants (89.9%) are aged less than 35 years. Meanwhile, 85.2% of participants are undergraduate students, 10.9% are graduate students, and only 3.9% are Ph.D. students enrolled in different programs and specializations (Table 1).

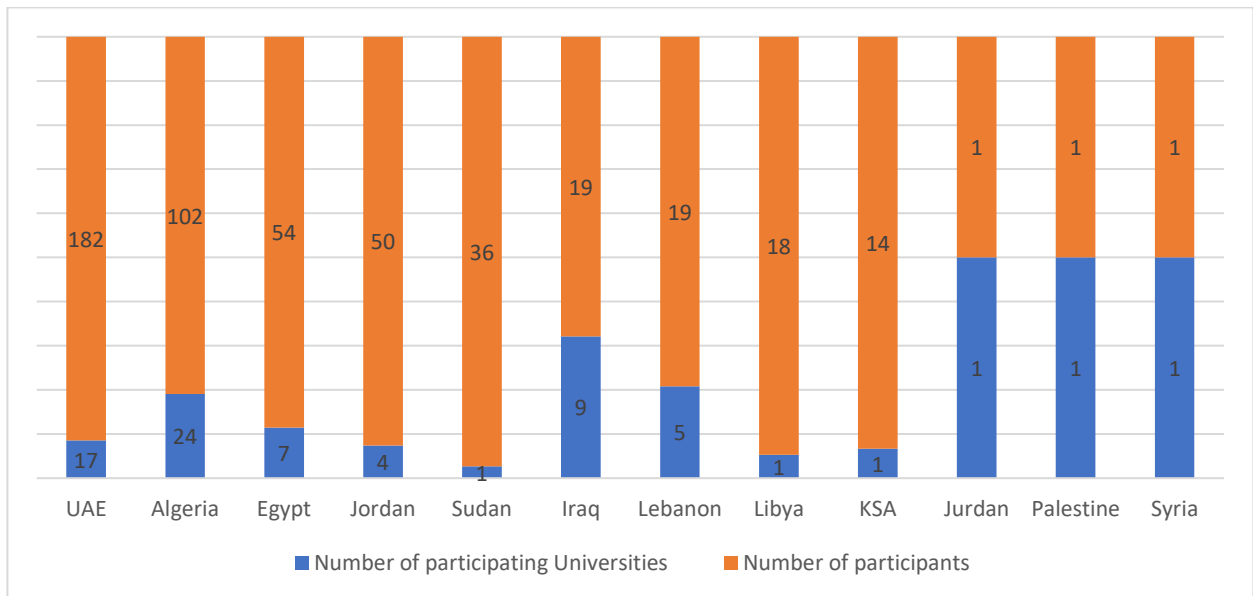
**TABLE 1**  
**AGE AND GENDER CROSS TABULATION**

Age	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
17 – 22	172(34.8%)	56(11.3%)	228(46.2%)
23 – 28	81(16.4%)	79(16%)	160(32.4%)
29 – 34	24(4.9%)	32(6.5%)	56(11.3%)
35 – 40	13(2.6%)	21(4.3%)	34(6.9%)
40+	3(0.6%)	13(2.6%)	16(3.2%)
Total	293(59.3%)	201(40.7%)	494(100%)

Specialization	Academic Level			Total
	BA	MA	PhD	
Public relations & advertising	193(39.5%)	20(4.1%)	3(0.6%)	216(44.3%)
Radio & television	55(11.3%)	11(2.3%)	5(1.0%)	71(14.5%)
Journalism, electronic or digital journalism	40(8.2%)	16(3.3%)	4(0.8%)	60(12.3%)
Multimedia & electronic publishing	3(0.6%)	1(0.2%)	2(0.4%)	6(1.2%)
Others	125(25.6%)	5(1.0%)	5(1.0%)	135(27.7%)
Total	416(85.2%)	53(10.9%)	19(3.9%)	488(100%)

**FIGURE 3**  
**COUNTRIES, NUMBER OF PARTICIPATING UNIVERSITIES, AND NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS**



## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Distance Learning Platforms

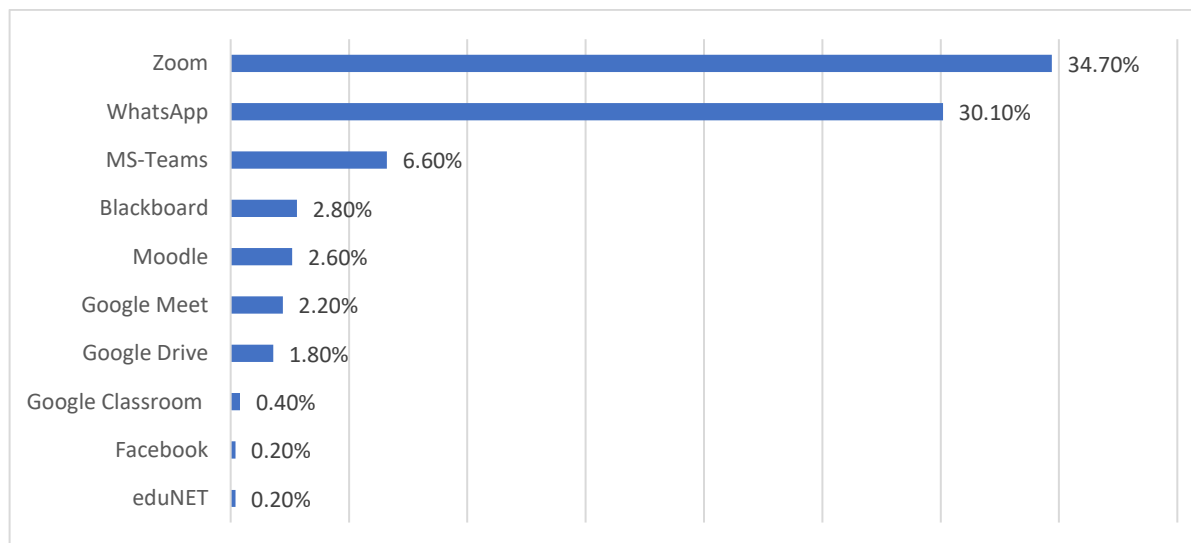
Respondents were asked to indicate the platform they used for distance learning during the Corona pandemic. The findings show that 25 out of 54 participating universities used at least two platforms for distance learning during this time. Figure 4 illustrates the top three platforms used were Zoom (34.70%),

WhatsApp (30.10%), and Microsoft Teams (6.60%). From the bottom, the least used platforms were eduNet and Facebook (0.20%), Google Classroom (0.40%), and Google Drive (1.80%).

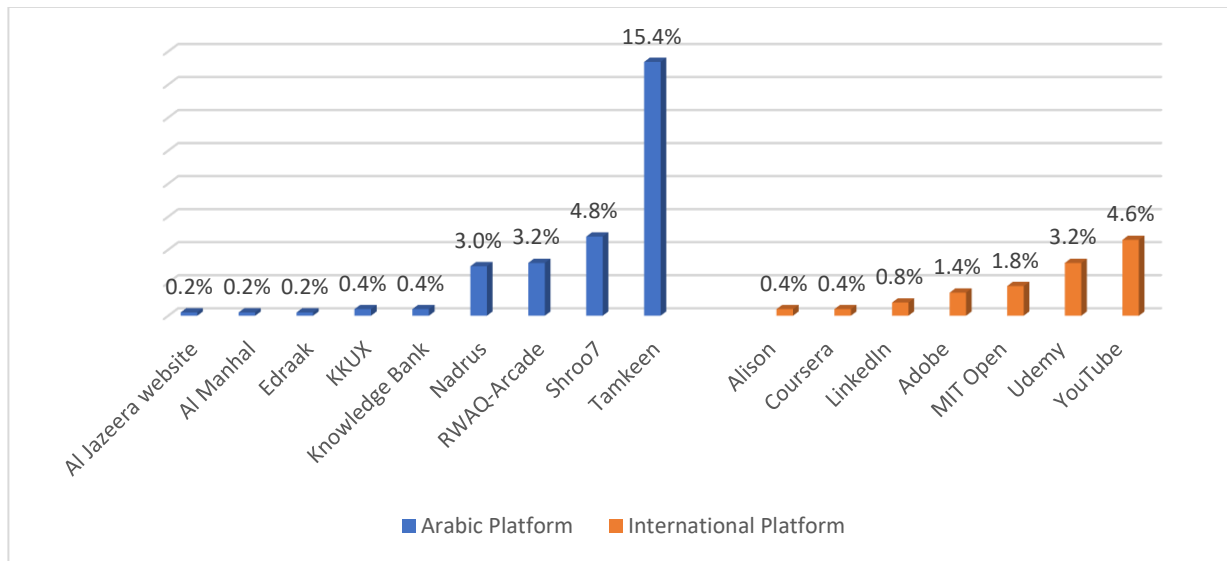
Meanwhile, Figure 5 indicates additional international and Arabic platforms used by the students for distance learning during the Corona pandemic. For the international platforms, YouTube is first (4.6%) followed by Udemy (3.2%) and MIT Open (1.8%). For the Arabic platforms, Tamkeen occupied the first position (15.4%) followed by Shroo7 (4.8%) and RWAQ-Arcade (3.2%). These results are in line with Al-Iraqi et al.'s (2021) study, which reported the status of educational platforms of Saudi universities. The authors found that Saudi universities used distance learning platforms for virtual classes, assessments, and discussion boards.

It is noteworthy that many governments of the Arab countries have supported directly or indirectly distance learning with free local and international platforms for the schools and students. In the UAE, the Ministry of Education provides on its smart learning portal 13 educational platforms for students and multiple educational options (Al-Jammal, 2020). In Algeria, the government launched several electronic educational platforms after the spread and outbreak of the coronavirus. Similar initiatives are observed in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Qatar, and Oman.

**FIGURE 4**  
**DISTANCE LEARNING PLATFORMS USED BY THE PARTICIPATING UNIVERSITIES**



**FIGURE 5**  
**OTHER ARABIC AND INTERNATIONAL PLATFORMS USED BY THE PARTICIPANTS**  
**DURING THE CORONA PANDEMIC**



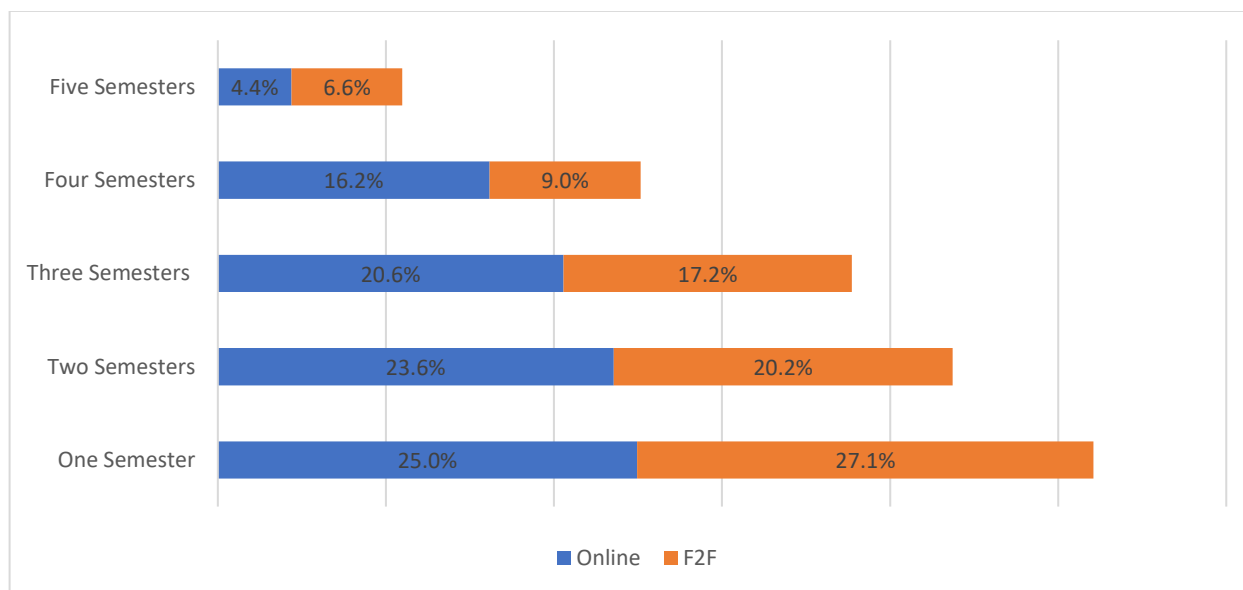
### Online Semesters Versus Face-To-Face (F2F) Semesters

Participants were requested to indicate the number of semesters they studied online and F2F during the Corona pandemic. As illustrated in Figure 6, the results show that 23.6% of the students attended two semesters online compared to 20.2% for F2F learning. Similarly, 20.6% of participants attended three semesters online against 17.2% for F2F learning while 16.2% of the students attended four semesters online against 9% for F2F learning. Nevertheless, F2F learning recorded more attendants for one semester (27.1%) than online learning (25%). In addition, F2F learning registered more students taking five semesters (6.6%) as compared to online learning (4.4%).

The above findings suggest that despite the spread of the Corona pandemic, some universities in the Arab world offered F2F courses to the students. Most of these courses could be practical courses for engineering and health science students that need to be conducted in laboratories. Concerning this, a study in India indicated that for agricultural courses it was impossible to shift completely to online education (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). Another possibility is that as many countries reduced restrictions for universities on F2F learning, most of the F2F courses were properly offered during the second year of the pandemic.



**FIGURE 6**  
**ONLINE AND F2F SEMESTERS ATTENDED BY THE PARTICIPANTS DURING THE**  
**CORONA PANDEMIC**



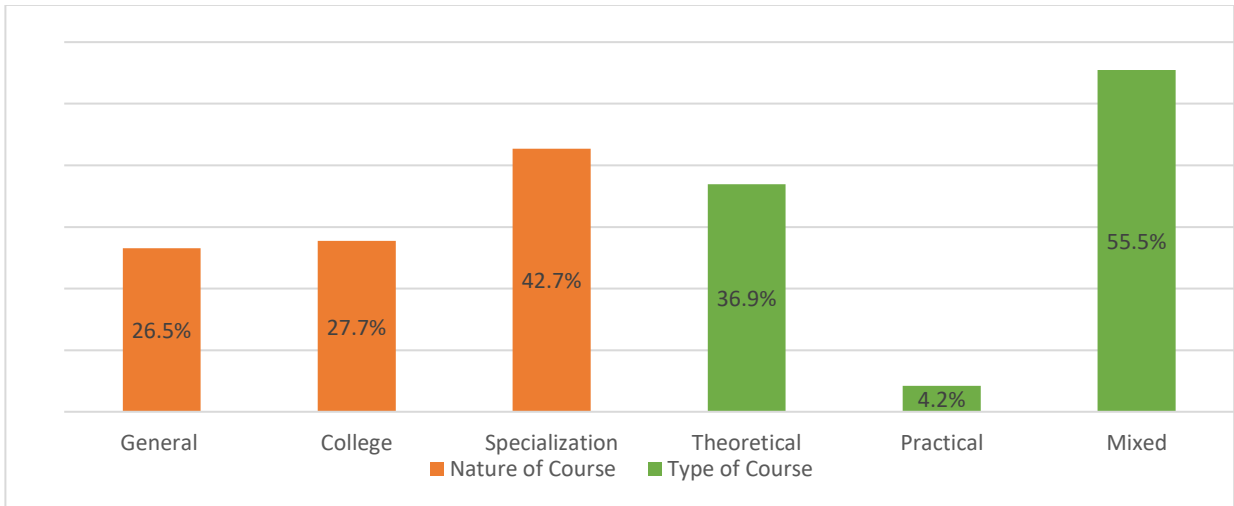
### **Types of Courses Attended Online**

Participants were asked to specify the nature and types of courses they attended online during the Corona pandemic. The results reported in Figure 7, reveal that 55.5% of the students attended both theoretical and practical courses online, 36.9% attended theoretical courses only, and 4.2% attended only practical courses online. For the nature of courses, 42.7% of the students attended specialized courses, 27.7% college requirement courses, and 26.5% attended general requirement courses online.

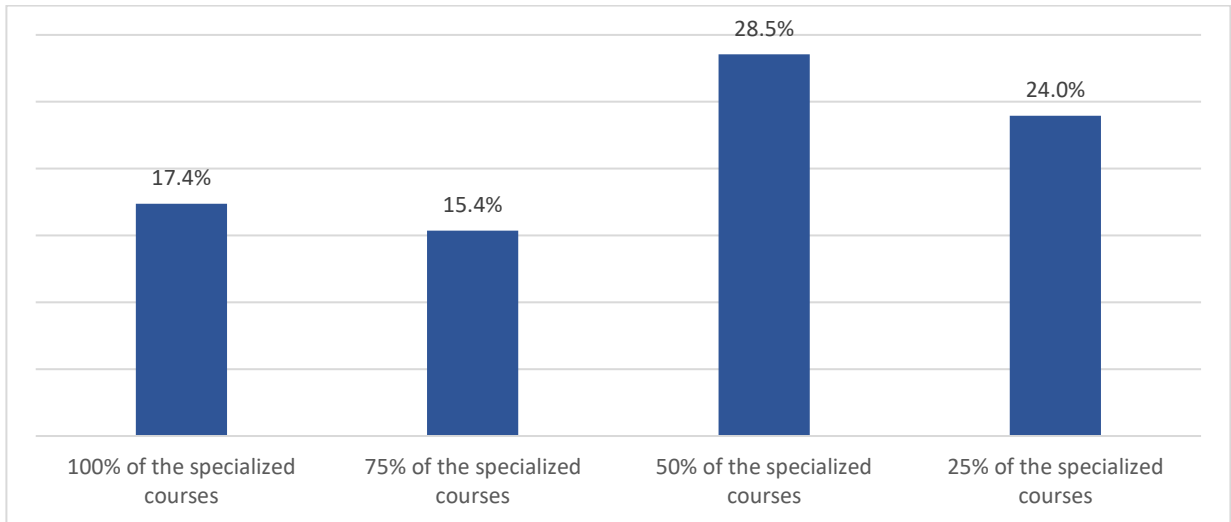
Meanwhile, in response to a specific question about the number of specialized courses taken by the students online during the pandemic, the findings of the study showed that 28.5% of the students attended 50% of specialized courses online, 24% attended 25% of specialized courses online, 17.4% attended all the specialized courses online, and 15.4% attended 75% of specialized courses online (Figure 8).

Moreover, participants were asked to indicate their preferred option for attending specialized courses. The findings reveal that more than 50% of the students prefer the F2F method for attending specialized courses and 23.50% of the participants have no problem with attending specialized courses through the F2F method and online education. On the other hand, more than 23% of participants preferred only online education for specialized courses while about 3% of the participants could not determine their preferred method for attending specialized courses (Figure 9).

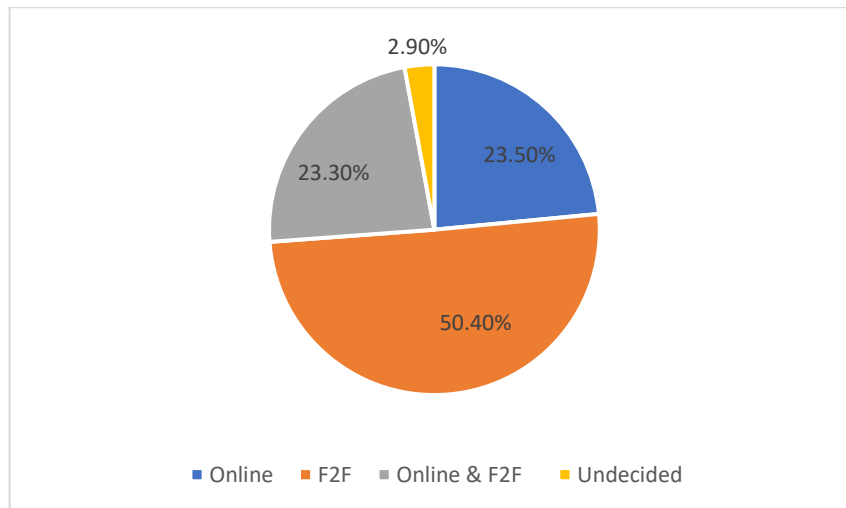
**FIGURE 7**  
**NATURE AND TYPE OF COURSES ATTENDED ONLINE DURING THE**  
**CORONA PANDEMIC**



**FIGURE 8**  
**PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS THAT USED SPECIALIZED COURSES ONLINE DURING**  
**THE CORONA PANDEMIC**



**FIGURE 9**  
**PREFERRED METHOD FOR ATTENDING SPECIALIZED COURSES**



**Perceived Experience with Online Education**

The fourth research question is intended to understand how the students of media and communication in the Arab countries evaluate their experience with online education in light of the pandemic. As presented in Table 3, 30.2% of the respondents thought that online education has its pros and cons 29.2%, indicated an outstanding experience and benefits with online education, and 10.1% thought that they had a good and useful experience with online education. However, more than 25% of the students reported negative or bad experiences with online education.

In general, the majority of participants expressed more positive than negative experiences with online education. Our findings are in line with previous studies that investigated students’ experience and acceptance of online education (Muthuprasad et al., 2021; Kulal & Nayak, 2020; Almahasees et al., 2021). In India, an investigation by Kulal and Nayak (2020) found that students were comfortable with online classes, but they do not believe that online classes will replace F2F classrooms. From Jordan, similar findings are reported by Almahasees et al. (2021).

**TABLE 3**  
**PERCEIVED EXPERIENCE WITH ONLINE EDUCATION**

No.	Experience	Frequency
1.	An experience that has its pros and cons	147(30.2%)
2.	An outstanding experience that I benefitted from greatly	142(29.2%)
3.	Experienced more negatives than positives	67(13.8%)
4.	Very bad experience	58(11.9%)
5.	Good and useful experience	49(10.1%)
6.	I can’t rate at this point	16(3.3%)

**Perceived Benefits of Distance Learning**

The results show that the top three benefits of distance learning as perceived by the students (Table 4) are saving time and effort and lowering costs (58.76%), continuity of learning across time and place (42.68%) and raising the ability and efficiency for immediate and rapid access to educational resources. These findings are in line with previous studies (Alghamdi, 2021; Ben Aisha, 2021). A study by Alghamdi

(2021) showed high to moderate levels of agreement regarding students' perceptions of the positive and negative impact of the Corona pandemic on their lives. Similarly, a study by Ben Aisha (2021) reported positive perceptions of online education among students. According to the results of that study, participants believed that online education is less costly as compared to F2F education.

Starting from the bottom of the list in Table 4, the three least perceived benefits are strengthening the skills of searching (2.06%), mastering the skills of using software (4.53%), and enhancing creativity and thinking skills. Similar findings have been reported by Allam et al. (2020). These findings suggest that students' involvement in online education does not necessarily reflect their possession of sufficient ICT literacy and creativity skills. This is because the majority of universities in Arab countries were not ready for online education before the Corona pandemic. The pandemic obliged them for the first time to experience online education without adequate training and guidance. Therefore, these universities should ensure that their students and faculty members receive sufficient ICT training and guidance on how to use effectively and efficiently online education sources and tools.

**TABLE 4**  
**PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF ONLINE EDUCATION (TOTAL RESPONSES = 485)**

No.	Benefit	Frequency
1.	Saving time and effort and lowering costs	285(58.76%)
2.	Continuity of learning across time and place	207(42.68%)
3.	Raising the ability and efficiency for immediate and rapid access to educational resources	155(31.95%)
4.	Enhancing skills and abilities in the use of educational technology	80(16.49%)
5.	Enhancing creativity and thinking skills	40(8.24%)
6.	Mastering the skills of using software	22(4.53%)
7.	Strengthening the skills of searching	10(2.06%)

### **Perceived Challenges of Distance Learning**

The findings indicate that the top three challenges perceived by the students (Table 5) are the weakness of the social spirit and the human dimension (40.20%), lack of understanding and assimilation of information and ideas (32.91%) and losing the ability to build true friendships (21.25%). On the other hand, the three least perceived challenges are loss of ability to focus and follow-up (2.8%), health problems caused by the heavy daily use of electronic devices, excessive confusion, and frequent network interruptions (2.50%), and delayed progress in completing curricula and graduating on time (5%).

The above findings support previous studies (Olsen, 2022; Alghamdi, 2021; David et al., 2020). In a study conducted by Olsen (2022), despite the benefits of online education recognized by the students, enrollment in online education was less preferred than F2F education. According to the students, the benefits of online education are not sufficient enough to replace F2F education. In a similar study, Alghamdi (2021) found that the top negative aspect of online education was the absence of a social learning environment and the inadequacies of online education for practical courses. Moreover, a report by David et al. (2020) concluded that the most significant obstacles to online education are the weakness of the online education system, the slowing down of students' progress, and the inability of students to access the Internet.

These findings indicate that the challenges of online education include financial challenges, technical challenges, social challenges, and health challenges as well. These challenges require different solutions and different treatments. Therefore, to provide adequate and appropriate online education, the top management of educational institutions in the Arab world should be able to identify these challenges and solve them appropriately so that they provide appropriate online education.

**TABLE 5**  
**PERCEIVED CHALLENGES OF ONLINE EDUCATION (TOTAL RESPONSES = 480)**

No.	Challenge	Frequency
1.	Weakness of the social spirit and the human dimension	193(40.20%)
2.	Lack of understanding and assimilation of information and ideas	158(32.91%)
3.	Losing the ability to build true friendships during this period	102(21.25%)
4.	Weak dialogue and discussion skills and dependence on passive reception	27(5.62%)
5.	Boredom from sitting too long in front of screens	26(5.41%)
6.	Delayed progress in completing curricula and graduating on time	24(5.00%)
7.	Excessive confusion and frequent network interruptions	12(2.50%)
8.	Health problems caused by the heavy daily use of electronic devices	12(2.50%)
9.	Loss of ability to focus and follow-up	10(2.08%)

### **Suggested Courses for Online and F2F Education**

The sixth and final research question of the study requested the respondents to suggest courses that should be taught through the online method and courses that should be taught through the F2F method. As presented in Table 6, the more than 33% of students suggested online education for theoretical courses while more than 32% of the students suggested F2F education for practical courses. In addition, the online method was suggested for teaching general requirement courses (online = 7.02%, F2F = 1.19%), and elective courses (online = 2.47%, F2F = .59%). Interestingly, more than 27% of respondents suggested online education for teaching all the courses while more than 20% suggested the F2F method for teaching all the courses.

For the individual courses, F2F method is preferred to online in teaching media courses (F2F = 10.71%, online = 8.67%), communication courses (F2F = 7.10%, online = 7.02%), introduction to press (F2F = 4.76%, online = 1.65%), research method (F2F = 4.16%, online = 2.06%), journalism (F2F = 3.57%, online = 2.89%), radio and television (F2F = 2.97%, online = 1.33%). However, the online method was suggested against F2F in teaching public relation courses (online = 7.02%, F2F = 5.95%).

These findings suggest that students prefer F2F education for media and communication courses to online education. Such preference not only reflects the benefits of F2F education but also the challenges they face with online education. Although many studies have suggested students' better performance in online education (Haddad et al., 2014; Cheng et al., 2017; Rajadurai et al., 2018) as compared to F2F education, they prefer enrollment in F2F education. This is because in a normal condition, F2F education has more intellectual, social, and financial benefits and fewer technical and health challenges as compared to online education. Therefore, universities in the Arab world offering media and communication programs should make F2F the premier option for teaching courses, with special attention to practical courses.

**TABLE 6**  
**SUGGESTED COURSES TO TEACH THROUGH ONLINE AND F2F EDUCATION**

No.	Online	Frequency	F2F	Frequency
1.	Theoretical	80(33.05%)	Practical	54(32.14%)
2.	All courses	55(27.72%)	All courses	35(20.83%)
3.	Media	21(8.67%)	Media	18(10.71%)
4.	Communication	17(7.02%)	Communication	12(7.10%)
5.	Public relations	17(7.02%)	Theoretical	10(5.95%)
6.	General requirement	17(7.02%)	Public relations	10(5.95%)
7.	Practical application	10(4.13%)	Introduction to press	8(4.76%)
8.	Journalism	7(2.89%)	Research method	7(4.16%)
9.	Elective	6(2.47%)	Journalism	6(3.57%)
10.	Research method	5(2.06%)	Radio & television	5(2.97%)
11.	Introduction to press	4(1.65%)	General requirement	2(1.19%)
12.	Radio & television	3(1.33%)	Elective	1(0.59%)

## CONCLUSION

Distance learning has been the best solution to continue educational activities during the Corona pandemic. Although it was the first experience for most of the universities in the Arab countries, the universities have been so far successful in implementing distance learning by using a variety of platforms in teaching Media and Communication courses. They used at least two platforms for distance learning. The major platforms used for distance learning were Zoom, MS Teams, Moodle, Blackboard, and WhatsApp. During the pandemic, students attended more semesters online than the F2F courses. Likewise, they attended more theoretical courses online than practical courses. Theoretical courses are more relevant for distance learning than practical courses. The students reported mixed experiences with distance learning. They believe that distance learning has both pros and cons, benefits, and challenges.

The benefits include saving time and effort, reducing costs, and ensuring the continuity of learning across time and place. In addition, distance learning helps students improve skills, creativity, and rapid access to educational resources. On the other hand, the challenges of distance learning include lack of F2F interaction, lack of understanding and assimilation of information and ideas, and losing the ability to build true friendships. Moreover, health and technical issues are also noted among the challenges of distance learning such as network interruption and dizziness. Thus, academic institutions in the Arab world are highly recommended to provide solutions for these challenges and limit their effects on the learning process.

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