Beyond the Screen: Students' Voices on Synchronous Online Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract
This study explores students' perceptions of synchronous learning during a period of rapid pedagogical transformation in higher education. Triggered by a systemic shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to online formats, institutions were compelled to redesign their teaching methods, communication channels, and assessment practices. Drawing on qualitative data from 5,154 open-ended responses in Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET) across two Israeli colleges, the research investigates how students experienced and interpreted these abrupt instructional changes. Four overarching themes emerged from the analysis: (1) the development and importance of soft skills, (2) the role of course structure, (3) perceptions of instructional professionalism, and (4) the influence of the digital platform. These findings offer insights into students' adaptive responses to institutional change and contribute to the understanding of synchronous online learning as a complex pedagogical process.

Keywords: Online learning**,** Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET)**,** performance, higher education

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Periods of crisis and disruption often accelerate existing trends in education, prompting rapid transitions from conventional in-person instruction to remote learning modalities. In recent years, many higher education systems faced such a shift, most notably during the COVID-19 pandemic, which acted as a catalyst for large-scale digital adaptation (Mathieu et al., 2020; Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2022). These transitions reshaped students' academic experiences and daily routines, introduced new modes of teaching and assessment, and redefined communication with faculty and administrative staff (Bezerra, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Kamarianos et al., 2020).

Platforms such as Zoom have become commonplace tools for conducting assessments, facilitating discussions, and giving lectures. Both teachers and students faced many difficulties because of this abrupt change, which necessitated adjusting to new pedagogical strategies, technologies, and interaction styles (Stefanile, 2020). The primary mode of academic engagement shifted to virtual platforms, which significantly changed the learning experience for students and highlighted the pressing need to comprehend the subtleties of effective online teaching in this newly prevalent modality (Turnbull et al., 2021).

This study explores students' perceptions of synchronous learning using Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET), focusing on the open-ended parts of the evaluations, where students evaluate the course and the instruction in their own language (without targeted questions). This feedback, provided by students, reveals what the students believed to be the key elements of effective synchronous teaching for themselves.

Thus far, there is no qualitative research that has yet been conducted on students' responses to studying via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of the existing research on student feedback (e.g., Almahasees et al., 2021; Cranfield et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2022) relies on quantitative data (e.g., surveys with rating scales). Qualitative studies that delve deeply into the reasons behind student ratings and the specific language they use to describe their experiences in online settings are less prevalent. The current study examines students' perceptions of specific courses in which they participated, enriching the literature with nuanced and sensitive observations described in their own words. This qualitative approach can provide richer and more refined insights into the underlying values and priorities regarding different aspects of online teaching.

Online learning had become an accessible alternative to on-campus studies, especially during crises when academic institutions are closed (such as wars and natural disasters), and, of course, after the COVID-19 crisis (Asirvatham & Jamil, 2025). Therefore, it is important to deeply understand the finer distinctions that students raise about what helps them learn effectively. Since online learning has nowadays become a significant and often the primary mode of delivery in higher education, comprehending what students value in this environment is essential for educators and institutions to design effective and engaging online courses. This research directly taps into the student voice, providing valuable insights into their experiences and priorities. Based on these observations, our research question is:

> What dimensions of synchronous online teaching do students emphasize in their open-ended SET narratives, and how do these dimensions illuminate the relational, structural, professional, and technological components of their learning experience?

Definition of Key Terms and Scope Boundaries

To clarify the conceptual scope of this study, several key terms require definition. "Online learning" is used in the literature as an umbrella term referring to instruction delivered through digital platforms, encompassing synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid formats. The present study, however, focuses specifically on "Synchronous online learning," defined as real-time, instructor-led instruction conducted through videoconferencing technology.

More precisely, the data analyzed here derive from courses delivered via Zoom-based synchronous instruction during the 2020–2021 academic year, a period marked by rapid pandemic-driven transitions to remote teaching. Accordingly, the findings reflect students' experiences within this specific technological and temporal context.

The term "student perceptions" refers to students' subjective evaluations, interpretations, and meaning-making processes as articulated in the open-ended sections of the Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) instrument. These narratives capture how students describe and prioritize dimensions of their learning experience rather than objective measures of instructional effectiveness.

This clarification delineates the scope of the study and indicates that the findings are most directly transferable to synchronous online teaching environments, particularly those relying on videoconferencing platforms.

Review of Related Literature

Challenges in the Transition to Online Learning: A Theoretical Framework

The rationale for this study is based on four theories concerning the challenges created by the transition to online learning. First, this research relies on Moore's (2013) Transactional Distance Theory, that maintains that teacher-student separation (as, for example, distance learning on Zoom) is more pedagogical and psychological than merely geographical. Moore's theory indicates that the greater transactional distance, the greater the detrimental impact on learning outcomes (Elyakim et al., 2017).

Moore (2013) identified three interaction domains that exist in distance learning: learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-learner interaction. Later on, a fourth domain of interaction—learner-interface interaction—was introduced and advanced Moore's theory by considering the interactions that take place between students and technology in the telecommunications era (Chen, 2001). According to the theory, effective online teaching strategies, such as clear communication, well-structured course design, and responsive support, can compensate for the barriers to effective learning that arise from the "distance" created by distant learning between lecturers and students (Kozlova, 2022).

Second, this research relies on the concept of Social Presence Theory (Lowenthal, 2010; Short et al., 1976) which investigates how digital interfaces affect the "sense of being with another" in communication based on technology (Biocca et al., 2003). The theory suggests that the feeling of being "there" and connected with others in a virtual environment significantly impacts learning outcomes and satisfaction. In online courses, instructor presence, characterized by timely and personalized communication, active participation in discussions, and the creation of a welcoming atmosphere, can mitigate feelings of isolation and enhance engagement (Lowenthal, 2010; Wut & Xu, 2021).

Third, this study is grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989). According to this theory, students' acceptance of Zoom as a primary learning platform relied on its perceived usefulness for academic success and its ease of use. Initial doubts about online learning likely stemmed from concerns over its ability to replicate in-person engagement, while perceptions were also shaped by students' technical skills, internet access, and familiarity with Zoom's features (Alfadda & Mahdi, 2021; Wedari et al., 2022). Computer self-efficacy (Achim & Al Kassim, 2015) influences students' perceptions of Zoom's usefulness and ease of use, which in turn shape their attitudes, intentions, and actual usage (Mohamed Riyath et al., 2022). Zoom's popularity is largely attributed to its user-friendliness and technological reliability, though technical issues, such as unstable internet, delays, and device limitations, can negatively affect student satisfaction (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

Finally, the transition to online learning could be examined through Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The transition to online learning highlights key psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that shape students' virtual learning experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Wang et al., 2019). While online education can support autonomy and competence, it often challenges the need for relatedness due to reduced interpersonal interaction (Jeon & Lee, 2023; Salikhova et al., 2021). Use of interactive tools like polls and breakout rooms enhances engagement and satisfaction, whereas monotonous, non-interactive classes may lead to alienation (Lowenthal et al., 2020). As indicated, timely feedback and personalized support also play a vital role in student satisfaction and relatedness (Hodges et al., 2020).

Empirical Research on Students' Perceptions of Online and Synchronous Learning

A growing body of empirical research has examined students' perceptions of online learning environments. Quantitative studies consistently find that students value instructor presence, clarity of communication, timely feedback, and course organization as key predictors of satisfaction in online courses (e.g., Ismaili, 2021; Cranfield et al., 2021). In synchronous formats specifically, real-time interaction, opportunities for participation, and perceived instructor responsiveness have been identified as central contributors to engagement and perceived learning (Lowenthal et al., 2020).

Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic further highlights the importance of relational factors in synchronous online environments. Studies report that students frequently emphasize instructor empathy, adaptability, and communication style as critical determinants of their experience (Means & Neisler, 2021). At the same time, technological reliability and course structure were found to influence students' sense of stability and learning effectiveness during emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020).

Within SET research specifically, empirical studies often rely on structured Likert-scale measures that capture predefined dimensions such as clarity, organization, and instructor effectiveness. However, fewer studies have examined open-ended narrative responses to identify how students themselves frame and prioritize dimensions of online instruction. As a result, much of what is known about student perceptions in synchronous online contexts derives from survey-based instruments rather than large-scale qualitative analysis of student-generated narratives.

Lecturers' Evaluations as Tools for Identifying Student Needs

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) are a ubiquitous element of the academic landscape, serving as a primary mechanism for gathering student feedback on instructor performance and course quality (Hammonds et al., 2017). Traditionally, these evaluations

have been utilized for a variety of purposes, including promotion and tenure decisions, formative feedback to instructors for pedagogical improvement, and overall program evaluation (Harrison et al., 2022; Ulker, 2021). While the focus has often been on assessing instructor effectiveness in face-to-face settings, SET's rich textual data within open-ended responses can offer a valuable, albeit sometimes underutilized, window into the student experience. These qualitative comments can reveal underlying student needs, preferences, and perceptions regarding various aspects of the learning environment, going beyond the quantitative ratings to provide nuanced insights into what resonates with students and where challenges exist (Harrison et al., 2022; Mok et al., 2021).

Student comments in SETs became especially significant considering the pandemic-induced shift to online learning. These assessments serve as a direct conduit for student voices, expressing their successes, struggles, and experiences in the online learning environment (Warfvinge et al., 2022). Researchers learn more about what students believe to be successful online teaching strategies by closely examining the language, themes, and sentiments conveyed in these qualitative responses. For example, recurring remarks regarding the usefulness of interactive tools, the clarity of online instructions, the sense of community that is created (or not) in the virtual setting, and the availability of resources, all draw attention to valuable components of effective online pedagogy (Boysen, 2023; Warfvinge et al., 2022). Thus, the qualitative data can inform pedagogical changes and the creation of more successful online learning experiences, ultimately promoting a more student-centered approach in the changing higher education landscape (Boysen, 2023).

Research Gap and Contribution

Despite extensive theoretical development and growing empirical research on online learning, several gaps remain. First, while prior studies identify factors such as engagement, instructor presence, and technological functionality, these dimensions are typically measured using predefined survey constructs rather than emerging inductively from students' own language (e.g., Cranfield et al., 2021; Means & Neisler, 2021). Second, few studies have systematically analyzed large-scale open-ended SET responses to examine how students narratively construct their experiences of synchronous online instruction (Sun & Yan, 2023; Ullmann & Rienties, 2021). Third, the rapid transition to Zoom-based learning during 2020–2021 provides a unique context in which students experienced fully synchronous remote instruction, yet qualitative syntheses of these experiences remain limited (Almahasees et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2022).

The present study addresses these gaps by conducting a thematic analysis of open-ended SET responses to identify the dimensions of synchronous Zoom-based instruction that students themselves emphasize. By grounding the analysis in students' narratives, this study contributes an empirically derived framework that complements existing survey-based findings and refines theoretical models of online learning. Therefore, as mentioned in the introduction, our research questions is: What dimensions of synchronous online teaching do students emphasize in their open-ended SET narratives, and how do these dimensions illuminate the relational, structural, professional, and technological components of their learning experience?

Method

Qualitative Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2014; Taylor et al., 2016) to examine students' perceptions of synchronous online learning. Given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the large corpus of open-ended Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET) responses, inductive thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate analytic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2017). This approach allows patterns and meanings to emerge from participants' narratives while preserving contextual nuance and interpretive depth.

Procedure

Open-ended SET responses were collected from two Israeli higher education institutions (one public and one private) during the 2020–2021 academic years, when instruction was conducted synchronously via Zoom. Institutions were recruited through convenience sampling by contacting Directors of Teaching and Learning. Both institutions granted permission to use anonymized SET files following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. It was important to discern if there were different expectations or demands from students at a public versus private institution, in line with consumerism theory (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Guilbault, 2018) but no such differences were evident.

The dataset included only open-ended student comments related to online instruction. No identifying information about students or lecturers was included in the files provided to the research team. All responses were originally written in Hebrew. The thematic analysis was conducted using the original Hebrew dataset to preserve semantic nuance and contextual meaning. For publication purposes, illustrative excerpts were translated into English by the first author, who is fluent in both languages. A bilingual academic colleague independently reviewed a sample of translated excerpts to ensure semantic equivalence. Minor refinements were made where necessary to preserve tone and intent.

Participants

The dataset comprised 5,154 anonymous open-ended responses (1,219 from the private institution and 3,935 from the public institution). Responses were drawn from undergraduate and graduate programs in education, law, business administration, and behavioral sciences. Most comments related to regular academic courses, with a smaller portion referring to seminars, workshops, and practicum-based instruction. Completion of SETs was voluntary. Students were not required to complete evaluations, and multiple responses from the same student were possible if they were enrolled in multiple courses.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2017) six-phase framework. All 5,154 open-ended responses were exported into structured spreadsheets and coded manually.

Phase 1: Familiarization. Two authors immersed themselves in the dataset through repeated reading of the responses to gain a comprehensive understanding of recurring meanings, patterns, and linguistic nuances.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes. The first author conducted open coding across the dataset, identifying meaningful segments of text and assigning preliminary codes. To enhance analytic rigor, the second author independently coded a subset of responses to assess interpretive consistency. Coding consistency was periodically

reviewed collaboratively across the full dataset. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached, leading to refinement of code definitions and development of a shared coding framework.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes. Related codes were examined for conceptual similarity and grouped into 18 preliminary themes reflecting key aspects of students' experiences of synchronous online learning.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes. The 18 themes were collaboratively evaluated for coherence, overlap, and distinctiveness. Alternative thematic structures were considered and discussed before agreement was reached on the most conceptually parsimonious organization.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes. The themes were conceptually clustered into four overarching categories and corresponding sub-themes based on internal consistency and recurring language patterns. Although this stage involved interpretive abstraction, it was not structured according to predefined theoretical models. The clustering process followed a collaborative interpretive procedure based on conceptual similarity, internal coherence, and recurring linguistic patterns rather than theoretical alignment.

Phase 6: Producing the Report. After finalizing the thematic structure, the full dataset was revisited to ensure consistent application of themes. Representative excerpts were selected to illustrate each theme, and frequencies and percentages were calculated to indicate relative prevalence.

Although the literature review presents four theoretical frameworks relevant to online learning, these did not guide the coding process. The analysis remained inductive and grounded in the data. The theoretical frameworks functioned as sensitizing concepts during interpretation and were explicitly integrated in the Discussion section to contextualize and extend the empirical findings.

Importantly, the four overarching themes (soft skills, structuredness, professionalism, and technological medium) emerged from the clustering of data-driven themes and were not constructed to correspond directly to the four theoretical frameworks presented in the literature review. The clustering process was guided by conceptual coherence within the dataset rather than by alignment with specific theories. The theoretical frameworks (transactional distance, social presence, TAM, and SDT) were subsequently used in the Discussion section as interpretive lenses to contextualize and extend the empirical findings. Any conceptual overlap between themes and theories reflects interpretive resonance rather than deductive structuring.

Results

The review included a thorough theme analysis that emerged from the students' SETs. The results of this theme analysis were divided into four categories: (1) soft skills, (2) structuredness, (3) professionalism, and (4) the technological medium, with soft skills capturing relational dimensions and professionalism reflecting instructional expertise and academic conduct. The most prevalent sub-themes were care (n=1561; 30.3%) and clarity (n=1329; 25.8%), reflecting students' strong emphasis on relational and structural aspects of synchronous online learning. Although certain relational descriptors appear across multiple themes, each category captures a distinct functional dimension of students' experiences. The themes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

The themes of the students

Theme	Sub-theme	
1.Soft skills	1.1 Supportive behaviors	1.1.1 Availability (n=248) 1.1.2 Care (n=1,561) 1.1.3 Responsiveness (n=371)
	1.2 Self-Management	1.2.1 Patience (n=434) 1.2.2 Pace (n=531) 1.2.3 Adaptiveness (n=329) 1.2.4 Trustworthiness (n=438)
2. Structuredness	2.1 Synchronization (n=476) 2.2 organization (n=350) 2.3 The course's presentations (n=295)	
3. Professionalism	3.1 Content professional (n=270)	
	3.2 Pedagogical professional	3.2.1 Thought provoking (n=1,519) 3.2.2 Clarity (n=1,329) 3.2.3 Engagement (n=426)
4. The technological medium	4.1 Zoom Fatigue	4.1.1 Difficulties with concentration (n=101) 4.1.2 Straightforwardness (n=223)
	4.2 Technical problems (n=164) 4.3 Privacy (n=50)	

Soft Skills

Many of the students addressed various soft skills necessary for learning via Zoom.

Supportive Behaviors

Supportive behaviors of a lecturer towards students are actions and approaches aimed at creating a positive and encouraging learning environment.

Availability. Numerous students addressed the fact that the lecturer was available for them after the lesson for questions or problems they have. Of course, in some cases they referred to their frustration due to the instructor's lack of availability. This irritation could be attributed to the fact that after the lesson, students who are uncomfortable asking questions in a big group might feel more at ease addressing a lecturer privately. Here are several samples of the students' responses:

> *Response 736*: The best lecturer I had in my degree, completed lessons for those who couldn't make it to the original lesson, at the expense of his time and when it was convenient for us.

Response 1524: In this course, as in the research methods course, the lecturer was incredibly available, answered questions and made sure that we understood everything.
Response 186: The availability of lecturer is very low. He asks to be contacted only by email and does not respond, only after 2-3 reminders.

Care. Many students took notice of the fact the lecturers put in much effort and were committed to the students' success. These responses were a function of the lecturers' enthusiasm or their genuine desire and concern that all their students would understand them and, consequently, succeed in the course. Examples include:

Response 3358: A teacher who inspires those who are going to become teachers themselves—empathetic, inclusive and attentive, and very caring towards the students.

Response 1040: He always makes us feel good and pleasant in class and always cares about our well-being and tries to help in every possible way, considers our requests and always finds the best way to assist us.

Response 629: The lecturer was God sent, and she knows how to teach and convey the material exactly as expected for a student who is just learning English. A very considerate lecturer and always alert to any problem of any student who is struggling. There is nothing left unclear at the end of her lesson.

Response 423: He cares about the students and relates the lesson to how theoretical material is reflected in our everyday life.

Responsiveness. Many students referred to the manner in which the lecturer answered their questions during class. Many responses related to the lecturers' attitudes towards the students as reflected in the way they answered their questions. Notably, however, in this sample, various students indicated that the lecturer should have better control of the classroom and left less time for questions that distract them from teaching. Examples of students' responses to teacher responsiveness include:

Response 93: Indifference in answering students' questions. The lecturer answers briefly without a detailed and clear explanation. Without outside help, I do not have the ability to pass this course.

Response 338: He cares about the students, always asks if the material is clear and answers questions in detail. It's fun to study with him.

Self-Management

These actions and approaches of lecturers are aimed at managing themselves and their responsibilities efficiently and professionally.

Patience. Many student responses stressed the importance of lecturers' patience with them; and, in some cases, they complained about their lecturers' lack of patience. Examples include:

Response 308: The lecturer was patient and did not finish a class before everyone understood the material being taught.

Response 410: …. Sometimes she loses patience and becomes less pleasant and does not allow the questions to be asked. This hurts the desire to listen to her and even leave the class!

Response 4455: In my opinion, there is a need for more listening and patience on the part of the lecturer. Beyond that, the content of the lesson should be delivered more slowly, and the lecturer should listen to the students' difficulties.

Pace. Several students addressed the pace of the lecturer, stressing that lecturers speak too quickly, such that it is difficult to keep up. Examples include:

Response 449: The material is interesting, unfortunately the lecturer teaches at his own fast pace; it's hard to follow him.

Response 476: As a student, it is very difficult for me to understand the material without the lecturer dictating to me because it is not my mother tongue and also because it is a new method for me. I had a lot of difficulty with this course. I repeated the recordings from the beginning to understand a little more.

Response 1626: The lecturer needs to slow down the pace of study a little. We felt that we studied to finish the material rather than to understand it.

Adaptiveness. Several students referred to learning in which lecturers adapted themselves to the medium of Zoom. In some cases, the lecturers were praised for understanding the challenges of studying in Zoom, while, in some cases the feeling was that lecturers did not adjust and simply continued to teach as they would have taught face-to-face without any consideration of the limitations of the situation. Here are some illustrations that demonstrate this point:

Response 625: She was one of the few lecturers who managed to adapt the lessons to Zoom in an interesting and simple way. She made sure to take a break every 45 minutes because she understands that after 45 minutes in front of a screen it's hard to concentrate. In addition, she made all kinds of questionnaires and distributed them to the breakout rooms to convey the message and create interest.

Response 481: An excellent form of study that adapts to our times and enables learning with pleasure.

Response 1686: An organized lecturer, adapted to distance learning, explains with the help of the computer board and in every possible way she finds so that everyone understands, and does not give up until everyone understands.

Trustworthiness. The students referred to various issues regarding the fairness of the lecturer. Some complained that lecturers utilized unfair and inconsiderate criteria; several suggested that the course required knowledge or skills they did not possess. Other comments included unfair treatment in grading papers or exams and even interpersonal dismissive or offensive remarks (even to the point of bullying). Sample responses include:

Response 870: The lecturer's sexist or sometimes ethnic remarks hurt students who come from a religious background or any background that is different in the landscape of the academy.

Response 1211: The attitude she gives to the students is sometimes terribly humiliating and irrelevant. It's not fun to attend class because it really insults us.

Response 4812: The lecturer acted unfairly in giving grades and giving rights to students with accommodations.

Together, these patterns indicate that students expected lecturers to combine interpersonal sensitivity with self-regulation to sustain engagement in Zoom-based environments.

Structuredness

The virtual environment could be chaotic, ambiguous, and disengaging. Therefore, many students emphasized their desire that the lecturer and the lesson will be clear, well-structured and organized.

Synchronization. This theme refers to the synchronization between the lesson, the written material, the chores, the practice, the syllabus, and the exams (mostly to synchronization between any two of these components). A synchronized course incorporates these various components that work in unison to produce a seamless educational experience. Student issues included discrepancies between the lecturer and lecturer assistant; inconsistencies between the syllabus and what was actually taught; and contradictions between what the lecturer taught and what appeared on the exam paper. Several students addressed the correct balance between practical and theoretical material. A selection of the students' responses is shown here:

Response 442: In my opinion, the material we studied didn't match the level of the assignments or the level of the test.

Response 1063: An unclear course. I feel that there is pressure because there is no complete understanding of what needs to be done in the assignments and there is no understanding of the entire lesson.

Response 794: The practice classes contributed a lot to understanding, and the assistant explains the material excellently and is more patient in these classes.

Organization. Some students reported that the course felt chaotic, that lessons were not well-organized, and that the lecturer changed the topic abruptly. Examples include:

Response 9: It would be more appropriate if the course was built gradually. There is a feeling of confusion, jumping from topic to topic, incomprehensible explanations (the lecturer probably assumes that all students have a background in programming).

Response 89: The lecturer conveyed the material in a very thought-provoking way, but nevertheless it is sometimes very difficult to follow the material because he constantly jumped from topic to another according to the students' questions and thus there is no continuous course of the lesson. The material was difficult to follow.

> *Response 4465*: The course is messy and unclear in all respects – the way of teaching, the form of the exam, the study material. There is no real answer to any question, we all left the course with the feeling that no one understands what we learned here.

Course Presentation. The students gave considerable weight to the course materials with an emphasis on the presentations and reference materials. They mentioned several issues: The appearance of the presentations (graphically), how they are organized, their ability to rely mostly on the visual presentations and not what the lecturer said verbally. Here are some illustrations of this theme:

> *Response 315*: The preparation for the classes is very impressive. It's amazing to see how much thought was put into how to conduct classes in the time of COVID-19. It is possible to listen to the lecturer in class without fearing that we will not have enough time to copy the text because at the end of the class all the material that was transferred is uploaded to the website.

> *Response 485*: Excellent lecturer listens to and answers all questions. The presentations are not good in my eyes, their colors (yellow, black and red), made it difficult for me to focus

> *Response 2610*: The presentations with the details are great, they provided a lot of explanations and knowledge about what is being studied.

This category, "structuredness," highlights students' emphasis on clarity, organization, and coherence in online courses. Students also valued well-organized lessons, as well as clear and visually accessible presentations that support independent study.

Professionalism

The students commented on the lecturers' professionalism, both in terms of their expertise in the subject matter and their pedagogical skills in teaching.

Professional Content. Several students stated their appreciation for the professionalism of the lecturer in the subject matter, and, in some cases, expressed how impressed they were by the instructors' expertise. For example:

> *Response 837*: A lovely person with an insane amount of knowledge of the material and I really appreciate him but I'm sorry to say that there is a big difference between knowledge and imparting knowledge. In addition to lecturing knowledge, you also need to know how to convey material and here, in my opinion, he falls and we are the ones who end up losing from this.

> *Response 220*: It is important for me to say that he is an excellent professional lecturer, there wasn't a question that he did not know how to answer throughout the course.

Professional Pedagogics

Thought Provoking. Few students took notice of how much the course was thought provoking, challenging, or intellectually stimulating. Thought-provoking elements encourage students to consider why and how, going beyond simple memorization. This may entail dissecting case studies, investigating various viewpoints, or using the found knowledge to address practical issues. Based on these observations, the deeper understanding allows for

more effective retention of the material and a stronger basis for subsequent learning. Several examples that illustrate this point:

> *Response 132*: Beyond being a lecturer who only shares and contributes his knowledge to the student, he gives a desire to learn and deepen our understanding. I wish the academy had more lecturers like him.

> *Response 358*: The most interesting lesson by far. Immersive lecturer, insanely interesting topics. The lecturer always wants us to open our minds and renew. I enjoyed every moment; it's a shame it's over.

> *Response 3631*: The lecturer can facilitate dialogue with and between the students. The material is very interesting and arouses curiosity and excitement and it is important to allow discourse.

Clarity. Lecturers' clarity was one of the most prominent themes in the student feedback. The students praised the lecturers whom they considered to be clear and well understood. Conversely, if the lecturers were not clear enough, this inadequacy was reflected in the general tone of the feedback. Below, several responses illustrate this theme:

> *Response 1121*: Most of the time in the course the information is conveyed in an understandable way, but sometimes it is difficult to understand the lecturer's wording, and this can cause confusion.

> *Response 624*: Clear and precise explanation helped me forget all the math anxieties from high school.

> *Response 4466:* The lecturer should have tried to illustrate the lessons more clearly because it is abstract and ambiguous material.

Engagement. Several students indicated that the course was conducted in an engaging manner that promoted a dynamic learning process and deeper comprehension. They stated that the lecturer used enjoyable and interesting methods to deliver the material such as exercises, guest lectures, unconventional teaching methods, games, and polls. Also, the lecturer demonstrated the applied value that results from theoretical learning, i.e. how much the course has real-life applications, thereby creating student engagement in learning. Examples include:

> *Response 3320*: The personal stories were a very interesting way to learn the different theories. I feel that through personal experience I was able to connect more and understand the material studied in a better way.

> *Response 163*: The lecturer is very nice but conveys the material in a very monotonous and boring way. It was impossible to listen to her.

> *Response 225*: The course was delivered in a reasonable manner but I'm sorry the lecturer doesn't deliver in an interesting way and seems to only be in a hurry to go through slides and talk non-stop at a record pace. That's not what I came to the academy for. Disappointing lecturer.

In the "Professionalism" category, students emphasized both content expertise and teaching skills. They appreciated lecturers with deep subject knowledge but stressed that effective delivery is equally crucial. Pedagogical professionalism was reflected in three areas: thought-provoking content, clarity of instruction, and engaging, interactive teaching methods.

The Technological Medium

Although all the themes revolved around teaching online, some of the student feedback was addressed specifically to the technological medium and its ramifications for learning.

Zoom Fatigue

Difficulties with concentration. Many students mentioned the difficulty of concentrating for long periods of time on Zoom, a phenomena recognized as Zoom fatigue. Compared to a classroom environment that is under control, the home environment is full of potential distractions. Here are some examples:

> *Response 908*: This is an important course that requires thinking and understanding, it would make more sense to put it at the beginning of the day rather than at the end. This is a course that is suitable to be taken during the hours when students are alert.

> *Response 875*: Excellent lecturer, delivery of the lesson in an excellent and fascinating way…. I feel that the bonus questions given during class make most students increase their concentration level. Among the few courses where my concentration level is at 100% from the beginning of the class to the end.

> *Response 423*: Delivers the lesson in a very interesting way, makes everyone listen and concentrate on the lesson.

Straightforwardness. This theme is very much related to the difficulty of concentrating in the classroom. Many students mentioned that the course in question was concise and "to the point."" Because students may find it difficult to stay focused in online learning environments for prolonged periods of time, short lectures with concise, well-organized material are simpler to follow and maintain students' interest throughout the Zoom session. Zoom lectures that go on for too long can make the students feel tired and less focused. Here are a few examples that illustrate this idea:

> *Response 535*: A concise, professional lecturer who sends summaries at the end of every lesson!!

> *Response 913*: An excellent lecturer who conveys the material in a matter of fact, quick and clear manner! I enjoyed it very much.

Technical problems. The Zoom media creates a variety of technological problems: connectivity issues, sharing content, lack of knowledge about operating the Zoom (lecturers and students alike), managing participants (e.g. muting participants) and hardware issues (cameras, microphone, speakers, etc.). The students commented on these issues and their effect on the learning experience. Examples include:

> *Response 4163*: The quality of the Internet broadcast must be improved; we encountered quite a few problems on the subject in all the courses.

> *Response 363*: The lecturer's microphone wasn't working well. I haven't understood what he's saying since the beginning of the semester. In the first practices it was impossible to understand his words. He changed the microphone, but it is still not working well.

> *Response 396*: The lecturer who knew best how to operate the Zoom learning system!

Privacy. Many students addressed the issue of opening the cameras on their computers during lessons. Some students stated that much time was spent on this allegedly trivial issue, but others stated that they consider it a question of privacy. Several students felt that a mandatory camera policy is unfair, especially as they feel more comfortable participating without the video. Here are some examples:

> *Response 682*: There wasn't a single lesson that ten minutes would not have been wasted on opening cameras. A very interesting course, but a lot of talk was about the cameras, which would also interrupt the lessons.

> *Response 1061*: It's not okay to require the opening of cameras!

> *Response 4783*: It's at least a little difficult for me in Zoom studies to have an open camera, which makes me uncomfortable.

Reflecting on the technological issues associated with distant learning, students reflected on how the online format shaped their learning experience. They raised concerns about Zoom fatigue, especially difficulty maintaining concentration during long sessions, and emphasized the value of short, focused, and well-structured lessons. Technical issues such as poor audio, connectivity, and platform navigation were common barriers. Additionally, privacy concerns arose regarding mandatory camera use, with some students expressing discomfort or frustration over enforced policies.

Discussion

This study contributes to understanding online learning through the lens of several theories. First, these findings are in line with the Transactional Distance Theory (Moore, 2013), which highlights the psychological and communicative gap between students and instructors. Unlike prior survey-based findings that emphasize dialogue and structure primarily through predefined quantitative indicators (e.g., Abuhassna & Alnawajha, 2023), our narrative data reveal how students interpret transactional distance as a relational and emotional experience shaped by care, pacing, and perceived attentiveness. Students' feedback underscores the need for clear communication, organized courses, and responsive teaching to reduce this distance. Lecturers who show patience, care, and adapt effectively to the online format help foster connection and engagement. In contrast, unclear instruction, fast pacing, and technical issues increase isolation and hinder learning. Clear, structured materials also play a key role in minimizing transactional distance (Moore, 2013). Prior empirical work on Transactional Distance Theory has consistently emphasized the central role of dialogue and structure in shaping student engagement and satisfaction, with nearly 90% of studies focusing on interaction and communication (Abuhassna, & Alnawajha, 2023). Our findings confirm this emphasis by showing that students' expectations in synchronous Zoom environments were strongly anchored in perceived instructor responsiveness and structural clarity, reinforcing the empirical link between dialogue, structure, and reduced transactional distance.

At the same time, our study extends prior research by demonstrating that in emergency-mediated synchronous contexts, transactional distance is experienced not only as a structural or communicative gap but as a relational and emotional phenomenon, suggesting that TDT may require a more explicitly human-centered interpretation in post-pandemic online learning environments.

The emphasis on soft skills and emotional expression highlights the continued relevance of Social Presence Theory in Zoom-based learning, underscoring the importance of instructors' responsiveness, care, and emotional engagement in fostering connection and reducing student isolation (Alsayer & Lowenthal, 2024; Lowenthal, 2010). Students valued lecturers who were responsive, caring, and engaged, qualities that enhance social presence and reduce feelings of isolation. In contrast, poor self-management, impatience, and lack of adaptation to online teaching signaled a low social presence, harming student experience. As Goleman (2000) noted, self-management is key to effective leadership. Creating a safe, supportive atmosphere is essential for meaningful interaction and positive learning outcomes in online settings (Kozlova, 2022). Prior empirical research on Social Presence Theory has consistently shown that higher perceived social presence is associated with greater student satisfaction and engagement in online learning (Weidlich et al., 2023). Our findings confirm this relationship, as students emphasized the importance of instructor visibility, responsiveness, and interpersonal warmth in synchronous Zoom environments

The SET feedback aligns closely with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), especially regarding perceived ease of use and usefulness (Bhatt & Shiva, 2020). Students emphasized the importance of organized, clearly delivered, and well-structured courses, reflecting their need for both content expertise and effective pedagogy. When online courses are synchronized and supported by clear communication and accessible materials, they reduce cognitive load and foster greater acceptance of the technology. Recent studies show that both educational and emotional support play a key role in promoting students' acceptance of digital learning—educational support enhances perceived usefulness, while emotional support improves perceived ease of use (Alshammari & Alkhwaldi, 2025; He et al., 2023). These findings highlight the need to combine clear instruction with emotional attentiveness to sustain engagement and reduce barriers to technology use.

The interpersonal aspects highlighted in the student feedback resonate profoundly with Self-Determination Theory–SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017), emphasizing the critical role of relatedness, competence, and autonomy in the online learning experience. The consistent appreciation for lecturer patience, availability, responsiveness, effort, and fairness underscores the importance of fostering a sense of connection and belonging (relatedness). When lecturers demonstrate care, provide support, and create a safe environment for interaction, students' needs for relatedness are met, leading to greater engagement. Moreover, clear explanations, thoughtful responses to questions, and a lecturer's commitment to student success contribute to feelings of competence, empowering students in their learning (Jeon & Lee, 2023; Salikhova et al., 2021). Creating a supportive environment where students feel safe to ask questions promotes autonomy. Conversely, when such interpersonal support is lacking, students' motivation and satisfaction in online learning decline significantly. This paper's findings extend the SDT-based model presented in Shah et al. (2021) by shifting the focus from a structured "learning climate → need satisfaction → engagement" pathway to a more nuanced understanding of how students interpret online learning conditions. While that study found no direct effect of online learning climate on engagement, but a clear mediating role of need satisfaction/frustration, our paper deepens this by showing that students' lived

experiences (e.g., professionalism, soft skills, structure, technological mediation) shape how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are enacted in synchronous settings.

Taken together, the findings do not simply confirm the four theoretical frameworks but reveal subtle tensions among them. While Transactional Distance Theory and Social Presence Theory emphasize communication and relational closeness, the students' narratives suggest that structure and professionalism function not merely as supportive conditions but as emotional stabilizers in uncertain contexts. Similarly, although TAM focuses on perceived usefulness and ease of use, our data indicates that technological acceptance is inseparable from relational and pedagogical dynamics. These intersections suggest that existing models may insufficiently account for the affective and contextual layering of synchronous learning, pointing to a need for more integrative theorizing.

The emerging themes offer an empirically grounded framework that complements existing theories and deepens understanding of students' needs in online learning. Rooted in student perspectives, these research findings support the development of more nuanced, student-centered approaches for future research and practice. Beyond supporting existing frameworks, this study brings into sharper focus a critical and under-theorized element in online learning: *the need for personal connection and authenticity in the absence of full physical presence*. While previous literature has addressed the psychological and communicative dimensions of transactional distance (Moore, 2013) and the buffering role of social presence (Lowenthal, 2010), the current findings suggest that synchronous online platforms such as Zoom create a paradox: Students are simultaneously present and absent. They may log in yet feel invisible, attend yet remain disengaged. This liminal presence intensifies the need for *real relational intimacy*—for being *seen, known,* and *acknowledged*.

Student responses reflected a desire for more than just efficient knowledge transmission or technical fluency. They called for *human pedagogical presence*—a lecturer who not only teaches but listens, notices, and cares. This confirms Kozlova's (2022) and Hodges et al.'s (2020) claims about the relational deficit of emergency online teaching but goes further by grounding it in students' own words. What emerges is a need for *relational pedagogy*: emotionally intelligent, context-sensitive teaching that compensates for the medium's inherent impersonality (Goleman, 2000; Salikhova et al., 2021).

Furthermore, while the Technology Acceptance Model (Bhatt & Shiva, 2020; Davis, 1989) helps explain students' responses to interface and content design, it does not account for the *emotional cost* of disorganized, fast-paced, or indifferent teaching. This study extends TAM by showing how perceived ease of use and usefulness are filtered through a human lens: A course is "useful" if it is also humane, "easy to use" if the lecturer anticipates student challenges and mitigates them empathetically.

Lastly, the findings suggest that *students do not merely consume content online—they seek meaningful experiences.* The frequent mentions of unfair treatment, unstructured lessons, and alienating practices indicate that students view their online academic experience not just as a cognitive process but as a social and emotional journey. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on relatedness and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017) but repositions it within the specific constraints and affordances of remote synchronous education. This study highlights that effective online synchronous learning depends not only on technology or instructional quality, but on restoring human connection. Students seek presence, attentiveness, and fairness—elements that foster engagement and trust. As AI automates content, the lecturer's added value lies in empathy, adaptability, and relational skills.

Unlike prior pandemic-era studies that primarily relied on survey-based measures of satisfaction and engagement, the present study offers a large-scale narrative analysis that foregrounds students' relational interpretations of synchronous learning**.** While a substantial body of pandemic-era research examined emergency remote teaching, much of it relied on survey-based designs focusing on satisfaction, engagement, or technology acceptance. In contrast, the present study draws on a large corpus of open-ended student narratives across two institutions to capture how learners articulated their expectations in their own words. By integrating Transactional Distance, Social Presence, TAM, and SDT within a single interpretive framework, the study moves beyond variable-based confirmation toward a relational and paradox-oriented understanding of synchronous online learning. In doing so, it contributes a qualitatively grounded, theory-integrative perspective that highlights tensions and contextual layering often underexamined in prior empirical work.

Practical Implications

These findings have broad practical implications for improving online teaching. Institutions should prioritize professional development that strengthens instructors' relational and communication skills in virtual settings. Course design must emphasize clarity, organization, and accessibility, with clear instructions and engaging materials. Instructors are encouraged to boost student engagement through interactive tools, real-life relevance, and adaptable teaching strategies tailored to online learning. Addressing technological challenges is also essential. This includes investing in infrastructure, providing technical support, and training faculty to manage Zoom effectively while considering issues like fatigue and privacy. Finally, as AI becomes more integrated into higher education, the lecturer's human value—expressed through care, emotional intelligence, and pedagogical skill—remains crucial and warrants further research.

Limitations

First, the online learning landscape continues to evolve rapidly. While these findings provide valuable insights into the initial transition to Zoom, student needs and preferences may have shifted further as both instructors and students have gained experience with online learning modalities. Also, it is important to note that these changes were novel and forced upon students and lecturers alike. Since then, learning online has become much more prevalent. Also, although the findings provide insight into synchronous online instruction more broadly, they emerge from Zoom-based teaching during a specific pandemic context and should be interpreted within those boundaries. Future studies should investigate how this rapidly changing teaching method has evolved since.

Second, although SET (Student Evaluations of Teaching)is an important source of information, it is somewhat biased. Although students gave a sense of their needs and vision about how online learning should look, other pedagogical issues should be considered because what the students want is not always what they need or what is academically appropriate. Future research should further explore the influence of these needs on other aspects of teaching such as achievement and implementation of the learned material in daily settings.

Additionally, SETs are also subject to well-documented biases, including potential gender bias, halo effects, grade-related evaluations, and the influence of affective reactions unrelated to instructional quality. As such, SET data do not provide an objective measure of teaching effectiveness. However, the present study does not treat SETs as evaluative metrics but as narrative artifacts that reveal students lived expectations and interpretations of synchronous learning. By analyzing a large corpus of anonymous open-ended responses

across two institutions, we sought to identify recurring patterns rather than individual-level judgments, thereby mitigating reliance on isolated evaluative comments.

In addition, several methodological considerations delimit the scope of our findings. First, the study was conducted in two higher-education institutions within a single national context, which may limit transferability to other countries or cultural settings where expectations regarding instructor–student interaction, authority, or privacy differ. Second, the analysis relies on voluntary SET responses, which introduces potential self-selection bias, as students with particularly strong positive or negative experiences may have been more likely to participate. Third, although responses were analyzed in their original language, translation for reporting purposes may have involved minor shifts in nuance. Fourth, the absence of demographic data prevents examination of how perceptions may vary across student populations (e.g., undergraduate vs. graduate students, disciplinary fields, prior online experience). Finally, the study is based exclusively on textual SET data and does not include triangulation with additional sources such as interviews, classroom observations, or learning analytics. Future research employing multi-method designs and more diverse institutional and cultural contexts would help refine and extend the present findings.

Conclusion

This study highlights the centrality of interpersonal presence, course structure, instructional professionalism, and the affordances/constraints of the technological medium in shaping students' synchronous online learning experiences. Students consistently valued lecturers who were responsive, caring, patient, and adaptable; clear and coherent course organization; intellectually engaging pedagogy; and streamlined, reliable use of platforms and materials. Together, these factors mitigate "transactional distance" and sustain attention and motivation in virtual settings.

Declarations

Ethics Approval

The research involved secondary analysis of anonymized open-ended responses from Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET) collected in two higher-education institutions. Institutional permission and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval were obtained at both sites prior to data sharing and analysis. All datasets were de-identified before transfer; no student or instructor identifiers were retained. Given the use of existing, anonymized data, the IRBs granted a waiver of informed consent. The study adhered to relevant ethical guidelines for human-subjects research.

AI Use Statement

No generative artificial intelligence (AI) systems were used in the design, conduct, analysis, or writing of this study. Data handling, coding, interpretation, and manuscript drafting were performed by the authors.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest, financial or non-financial, related to the conduct, analysis, or reporting of this research. No external funding was received beyond standard institutional resources.

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