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Research Article

Toward Culturally and Linguistically Responsive E-Learning in Post-COVID-19 Higher Education: Perspectives from the United Arab Emirates

نحو تعليم إلكتروني مستجيب ثقافياً في التعليم العالي ما بعد كوفيد-١٩: رؤى من الإمارات العربية المتحدة

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused dramatic shifts in education worldwide. In the spring of 2020, universities abruptly moved to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERT&L), with online and hybrid education continuing into the post-pandemic era. In the Gulf, cultural, religious, and sociolinguistic dynamics can present additional challenges for teaching and learning online. Reluctance to use cameras due to modesty, privacy, and E-safety concerns, amongst others, affects interaction and rapport. This article presents empirical data from a qualitative phenomenological case study investigating male and female Emirati university students' (n = 107) perspectives on access, interaction, and engagement during Zoom classes in the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021. Students' reflective essays and researcher observations revealed that intersecting factors, such as gender, religion, culture, linguistic challenges in English-medium universities, and fear of judgment, affected participants' comfort levels and learning effectiveness in online classes. Data are analyzed through interpretive phenomenological analysis and the analytical tool of intersectionality, through which complexities of learner identities are explored. Practical suggestions are made on adapting online and hybrid learning to suit the sociocultural realities of Gulf states better by enhancing interaction and engagement in online classes without compromising comfort, E-safety, and privacy in post-pandemic education.

الملخص

تسببت جائحة كوفيد-١٩ في تحولات درامية في التعليم في كافة أنحاء العالم. وانتقلت الجامعات بشكل مفاجئ إلى التدريس والتعلم عن بُعد في حالة الطوارئ(ERT&L)، مع استمرار التعليم عبر الانترنت والتعليم الهجين في حقبة ما بعد الجائحة. ويمكن أن تشكل الديناميكيات الثقافية والدينية واللغوية الاجتماعية تحديات إضافية للتعليم والتعلم عن بعد في الخليج. حيث يؤثر الإحجام عن استخدام الكاميرات بسبب مبادئ الحشمة والخصوصية ومخاوف السلامة الإلكترونية وأمور أخرى، على التفاعل والألفة. وتقدم هذه المقالة بيانات تجريبية من دراسة حالة ظاهراتية نوعيّة تبحث في وجهات نظر الطلاب الجامعيين الإماراتيين من الذكور والإناث (العدد =١٠٧) حول الوصول والتفاعل والمشاركة خلال فصول منصة الزووم "Zoom" في خريف ٢٠٢٠ وربيع ٢٠٢١. وكشفت مقالات الطلاب وملاحظات الباحثين أن العوامل المتداخلة مثل الجنس والدين والثقافة والتحديات اللغوية في الجامعات المتوسطة الناطقة بالإنكليزية وعامل الخوف من الحكم، أثرت على مستويات راحة المشاركين وفعالية التعلم في فصول التعلم عبر الانترنت. تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام التحليل التفسيري الظاهراتي، والأداة التحليلية للتداخل، التي من خلالها يتم استكشاف تعقيدات هويات المتعلمين. كما تم تقديم اقتراحات عملية حول تكييف التعلم عبر الإنترنت

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والتعلم الهجين ليناسب الواقع الاجتماعي والثقافي لدول الخليج بشكل أفضل، وذلك من خلال تعزيز التفاعل والمشاركة في فصول التعلم عبر الإنترنت دون المساس بالراحة والسلامة الإلكترونية والخصوصية في التعليم لحقبة ما بعد الجائحة.

Keywords: *E-learning, COVID-19, higher education, intersectionality, culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, UAE*

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم الإلكتروني ، كوفيد -١٩ ، التعليم العالي ، التقاطعية ، التربية المستجيبة ثقافيًا ولغويًا ، الإمارات العربية المتحدة.

1. Introduction

At the time of writing, in early 2022, the world was entering its third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Omicron variant had caused a swell of positive cases, identified as the fifth wave. In the third week of January 2022, global COVID-19 cases reached over 300 million (Worldometer, 2022). Alongside climbing COVID cases came another round of restrictions on movement and everyday interactions. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were no exception, with the start of the year bringing more frequent testing and screenings. In the UAE, the government announced that the first three weeks of school and university classes would be taught via distance learning and a reluctant feeling of *déjà vu* ensued for many teachers, students, and parents under the realization that 2022 was ironically another way of saying 2020-too. This period was followed by a staggered return to face-to-face classes for school children and a full return to campus for university students, albeit with many remaining online due to having a COVID-positive status or having had close contact with someone who tested positive. Although a hint of optimism was in the air, this arguably resembled "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011) as despite high hopes for a return to pre-pandemic normalcy, ongoing effects of the pandemic seem likely to continue. In the domain of education, such effects relate to an increased number of online and blended classes.

At the start of the pandemic in March 2020, educators' primary goal was to manage practical aspects of the abrupt switch to "emergency remote teaching and learning" (ERT&L), such as gaining a better understanding of educational technology by becoming familiar with websites and apps which could effectively be used to engage students. As Hodges et al. (2020) explain, ERT&L differs from planned online learning in that face-to-face courses rapidly undergo "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" (p. 1). Publications during the pandemic's first

year primarily focused on ERT&L tips, apps, and "best practices" aimed at mainstream teaching contexts (Smith et al., 2021). Fewer studies have explored context-specific intersecting factors affecting pandemic-era education, especially in Asia and the Middle East. Previous pandemic-era ERT&L studies conducted in Global South or peripheral educational contexts have tended to take place in grade schools (Abudaqa et al., 2021; Hajar & Manan, 2022; Qureshi et al., 2021) where cultural and religious dynamics affecting adult learners are not taken into consideration.

Rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach to E-learning, context-specific factors together with individuals' learner identities need to be taken into consideration to enhance educational experiences. As Breslin (2020) points out, there are no standardized tales of the pandemic; instead, there is a "multitude of experiences, patterned as always by factors such as social class, ethnicity, family structure, parental occupation, mode of employment, and so on" (p. 3). Although the Gulf region shares characteristics with many global contexts, such as widespread English-medium education and diversity of students, certain dynamics existing in the Gulf countries can present additional challenges for E-learning, especially for those studying in higher education. Such dynamics include Islamic beliefs around privacy and modesty, cultural norms, gender segregation, home as a gendered space, and a generation of first-time university goers without adequate language support in the medium of instruction.

This study seeks to address the gaps outlined above by investigating the effects of ERT&L on adult learners in the UAE. Firstly, the article will discuss relevant literature on the impact of the pandemic on digital, cultural, gender, and linguistic divides and the importance of intersectionality as an analytical tool. The article will then present findings from a phenomenological case study investigating the online learning experiences of 107 Emirati university students. Based on the results, recommendations will be made on implementing more culturally and linguistically responsive online and blended learning in the post-pandemic era.

2. E-learning during the COVID-19 Era: Digital, Cultural, Gender, and Linguistic Divides

Following the immediate response stage of the pandemic's disruption to education, the literature on COVID-era teaching and learning widened to investigate inequalities surrounding access and inclusion in various global contexts. Such inequalities primarily relate to four main areas: i) socioeconomic status (digital divide); ii) E-safety and cultural practices (cultural divide); iii) gendered impacts of the pandemic (gender divide);

iv) language proficiency, especially in English-medium education contexts (linguistic divide).

Firstly, economic inequities in pandemic-era education relate primarily to the digital divide. The pandemic has especially affected students from deprived backgrounds, with "40 percent of students lacking access to online higher education internationally, either due to poor internet connectivity or a lack of digital infrastructure" (Martin & Furiv, 2020, p. 2). In the context of the USA, lower-income students are marginalized in E-learning contexts due to a lack of devices and adequate internet access (Smith et al., 2021). Even more so in developing countries, socioeconomic divisions have exacerbated the digital divide, with many students lacking access to technology, especially those living in rural areas (Ryan & Nanda, 2022; Strauss, 2020). Others have access to technology but do not have access to high-speed internet, as was found in Sri Lanka, where more than 70% of university students experienced connectivity issues during ERT&L (Khan et al., 2021). Although the UAE is classified as a high-income country (World Bank, 2021), not all students have access to their own devices or a quiet place to study with a strong internet connection, especially those in large households (Hopkyns, 2022). Due to the necessity of E-learning for remote education, the COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened the divide between the "haves" and the "have nots" regarding access dictated by socioeconomic status.

Secondly, religious and cultural identities of students also affect pandemic-era online learning, especially for Muslim female students. In Muslim-majority contexts such as Pakistan, female privacy has been a concern during the COVID pandemic, with university teachers observing female students' discomfort with using social media accounts and video cameras for online learning (Abid et al., 2021). Such discomfort relates to the involuntary blending of personal and educational domains, or "backstage" and "front stage" spaces (Goffman, 1959). In previous Gulf studies, a common reason for female university students' reluctance to use video cameras for online learning related to cultural concerns about female modesty, E-safety, and home privacy (Hopkyns, 2022; Hurley, 2020). Female Emirati university students tend to avoid sharing pictures of their faces. For example, profile pictures of Emirati women on social media sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram rarely include faces but rather scenes from nature, a neutral body part such as hands, a symbol, or initials (Hopkyns & Trejo, 2020). Hurley and Al-Ali (2021) use the metaphor of the *Mashrabiyya* structure to describe the online practices of Gulf female learners. The *Mashrabiyya* structure, which refers to traditional windows carved through wooden latticework screens, is commonly found in Arabian homes and other buildings. They allow the person inside to see out without being seen

clearly by those outside, thus protecting privacy. Opting not to use video cameras in online spaces has the same result.

Thirdly, gender divisions are exacerbated through online learning due to the status of "home as a highly gendered space" (Hurley, 2020, p. 3), whereby neopatriarchal expectations related to gendered identities place pressure on female students to take on childcare duties and housework more often than their male counterparts. Such gendered expectations affect not only female students but also mothers teaching in UAE universities, who disproportionately take on the roles of caretakers of the home and children's educational needs, leading to adverse effects on mental health, time management, and ability to do their own work (Said et al., 2021).

Fourthly, for many students who attend English-medium instruction (EMI) classes, the pandemic period of online learning has exacerbated linguistic challenges, causing a "linguistic divide" or an "English divide." EMI has recently increased globally, especially in higher education, due to internationalization goals and neoliberal agendas to compete in world ranking systems (Macaro, 2018). In the UAE, EMI dominates higher education (Carroll, 2022; Hopkyns & Elyas, 2022), and most university professors are from abroad and are not bilingual in English and Arabic. Many students in UAE EMI universities experience linguistic difficulties, especially if they previously attended mainly Arabic-medium instruction (AMI) schools (Gallagher, 2016). At federal higher education institutes, the relatively low English language admission requirements (Band 5.0–5.5 on the IELTS test or equivalent EmSAT score) exacerbate English language struggles (Jones et al., 2022). Such linguistic challenges are further tested in E-learning contexts due to the reduced quality of interaction, where teachers do not see students' faces and cannot provide the same level of support. In addition, due to most Emirati university students being the first members of their families to attend higher education (Davidson, 2012), there may be limited academic support at home in the medium of instruction.

3. Intersectionality in Gulf Education

Often overlooked in the field of education is how different forms of oppression and disadvantage can "interrelate in varying configurations within individuals and localized contexts" (Zotzmann & Rivers, 2017, p. 5). The concept of intersectionality, which was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and expanded upon by Collins and Bilge (2020), involves the understanding that social categorizations such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and language background overlap in complex and interdependent systems of disadvantage or inequality (Block & Corona, 2020). For example, a female Emirati university student may simultaneously be privileged due to her nationality and

economic status but disadvantaged in terms of gender and linguistic background in the context of EMI online learning. Local cultural and religious taboos around females showing faces online further disadvantage female university students in blended and digital educational contexts. In this sense, multiple identity aspects intersect to privilege or disadvantage various learners.

Intersectionality as a methodological framework and analytical tool has grown in popularity across disciplines. This can be seen through the number of special issues of journals and conferences dedicated to intersectionality, with the first global intersectionality conference hosted in Vancouver, Canada, in 2014, where scholars from around the world gathered to discuss the relevance of intersectionality to various contexts and studies (Hancock, 2016). Cho et al. (2013) distinguish "structural intersectionality" from "political intersectionality." Structural intersectionality is fundamentally tied to power relations where certain identity aspects or combinations of identity are subject to "multilayered and routinized forms of domination" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Rather than intersectionality merely recognizing overlapping social categorizations or identity aspects, such categorizations need to be understood in relation to power constructs operating in social contexts. As Tomlinson (2013) notes, it is an "analysis of power that reveals which differences carry significance" (p. 1012). Political intersectionality "reflects a dual concern for resisting the systematic forces that significantly shape the differential life chances of intersectionality's subjects and for shaping modes of resistance beyond allegedly universal, single-axis approaches" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 800). Essentially, political intersectionality focuses on recognizing nuances and implementing political action which can help bring the experiences of disadvantaged communities "from margin to center" (hooks, 1984).

Intersectionality research tends to include: i) Applications of an intersectional framework; ii) Discursive debates about the scope of intersectionality as a theoretical lens; and iii) Political interventions using intersectionality (Cho et al., 2013; Hancock, 2016). In this study, the former use of intersectionality is employed to analyze complexities in Emirati university students' learner identities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding complexities within human experiences through the analytical lens of intersectionality can help address issues of educational equity (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

4. The Study

The current study expands upon an earlier research project about female Emirati university students' (n = 69) attitudes toward video camera and microphone usage for ERT&L, which took place in the fall semester of 2020 (Hopkyns, 2022). In the

current study, the field of investigation is widened to explore Emirati university student perspectives on access, interaction, and engagement during online classes in relation to intersecting identity factors that were identified as relevant in the literature, such as economic status, gender, culture, religion, and linguistic background. An additional dataset from male Emirati university students (*n* = 38) was collected in Spring 2021 when students were in their third semester of online learning. The current study, therefore, analyses perspectives on access, interaction, and engagement during online classes from male and female Emirati university students (*n* = 107) over two semesters (Fall 2020–Spring 2021).

4.1. Approach and research questions

The study, which took place in a prominent Abu Dhabi government university in Fall 2020–Spring 2021, takes the form of a phenomenological case study. Phenomenology, which was founded in the early twentieth century by Edmund Husserl, investigates people's lived experiences and how they make sense of lived experiences in the context of their personal and social worlds (Smith & Nizza, 2021). Through the concept of intentionality, there is an understanding of the "interconnectedness of all things," whereby meaning-making occurs through intricate webs connecting individuals to their surroundings (Greenberg et al., 2019). Phenomenology is especially well suited to exploring experiences perceived as highly significant in lived experiences. As the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on education is an emotion-laden phenomenon affecting many areas of life, it is a suitable and important phenomenon to investigate through phenomenology. Phenomenology was combined with the case study approach as participants were bound by time and place (the online Zoom classroom), and the phenomenon of COVID-era E-learning was explored from multiple angles (student and researcher perspectives) in one context (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014). Through the phenomenological case study approach, the study aimed to collect rich qualitative data revealing insights into intersecting influences on lived experiences, perspectives, and beliefs voiced in students' writing. The study's main research questions included:

> RQ1) To what extent do Emirati university students support the mandatory use of video cameras and microphones for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
>
> RQ2) Which intersecting identity factors affect online learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how?

4.2. Data collection

For both phases of the study, participants (69 female students in Fall 2020 and 38 male students in Spring 2021) were asked to write a reflective essay on whether they felt using video cameras and microphones should be mandatory during the COVID-19 period of E-learning. The students were given one hour to complete this reflection in their Zoom classes and were instructed that the essay should be around 300 words and contain support in the form of examples. In both phases of the study, a colleague visited the Zoom classes to introduce the research project, for ethical reasons. Ethical clearance was gained from the university, and participants signed consent forms. The students were assured that the purpose of the writing task was to gain perspectives rather than assess language proficiency and the writing would not be graded. They were informed that participation was optional, they could withdraw at any time, and responses would be anonymized.

By focusing on a prominent aspect of online learning in the Gulf context (camera and microphone use), many intersecting factors, such as motivation, interaction, and engagement levels, interlaced with this aspect to provide a full picture of online learning experiences. In addition to the students' reflective essays, a researcher journal was kept throughout the online teaching experience, whereby points of interest were noted, such as perceived dynamics, motivation levels, and interaction patterns. For the purpose of this article, the students' essays are the primary data analyzed through Crenshaw's (1989) analytical tool of intersectionality, and notes from the researcher's journal are drawn upon where relevant.

4.3. Participants

The study took place in a gender-segregated government English-medium university. Although the university has a multilingual ecology due to its faculty originating from around 60 different countries and a small number of international students, mainly from Eritrea, the students in the study were all Emirati nationals with Arabic as their first language and English as a second language. Many of the students also spoke additional languages to varying degrees. The number of female students (n = 69) participating in the study outnumbered males (n = 38). This is reflective of a general gender imbalance at the university, and UAE universities in general (Sim, 2020), due to male students often choosing to study abroad or complete military service before getting a government job. A minority of the students had attended private or international EMI schools, with most having attended public schools that employed both EMI and

Table 1

Participant information.

Class	Number of students in classes	Students choosing to take part in the study	Class subject	Participant numbers
Female 1	24	22 (92%)	English composition II	F1–F22
Female 2	24	18 (75%)	English composition II	F23–F40
Female 3	24	18 (75%)	English composition II	F41–F58
Female 4	22	11 (50%)	English in the professions	F59–F69
Male 1	21	19 (91%)	English composition I	M1–M19
Male 2	20	19 (95%)	English composition I	M20–M38
Total	135	107 (79%)		

AMI (Arabic-medium instruction). While all students were Muslim and Emirati, some had a parent or family member from another country. Although direct and potentially stigmatizing questions relating to religion, ethnicity, size of the home, family size, and household income were avoided in the study, such intersecting identity aspects were often revealed through the students' writing or during online lessons. As the participants were in pre-existing groups, cluster sampling was used (Cohen et al., 2007). Most of the classes contained a cross-section of university students because English composition courses are mandatory for all, regardless of their chosen major. To provide participants with anonymity, pseudonyms were used in the form of "F" (for female students), "M" (for male students), and a number (see Table 1).

4.4. Data analysis

The students' reflective writing data were analyzed through interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This involved seven steps. Firstly, the students' reflective essays were read for general understanding and impressions. Secondly, initial themes were generated. Thirdly, initial themes were organized into clusters (grouping similar sentiments together), and fourthly, central themes were determined, which represented the "essence of these clusters" (Hycner, 1999, p. 153). Fifthly, a chart was created with subordinate themes and subthemes. The sixth and seventh steps involved returning to the students' reflective writing and repeating the above process to refine the chart of themes. Researcher presuppositions were "bracketed out" to enter the participants' unique world (Creswell, 2007). The analytical tool of intersectionality was used to interpret the data and to uncover complexities in Emirati university student identities in relation to the phenomenon of COVID-era E-learning. Researcher field

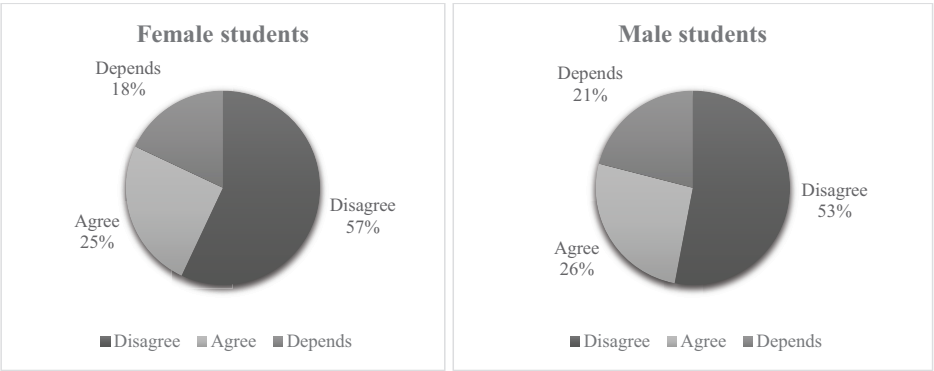
notes and memos kept in a weekly research journal were analyzed as a supporting data source, bringing an unobtrusive observational angle to the study.

5. Findings

To address Research Question 1, students' reflective essays were analyzed according to general position on the topic of mandatory use of video cameras and microphones for E-learning. Findings revealed that most female students (Fall 2020) and male students (Spring 2021) disagreed with the mandatory use of video cameras and microphones for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1). Students' perspectives matched their actions as from the researcher's journal, it was noted that only one student used her camera in the researcher's two years of teaching online classes during the pandemic. This student was a mature Dubai-based student and not a participant in the study. Male and female student perspectives were similar, with a slightly higher percentage of females disagreeing with a mandatory video camera and microphone use.

Figure 1

RQ1) Emirati university students' perspectives on the mandatory use of video cameras and microphones for E-learning.

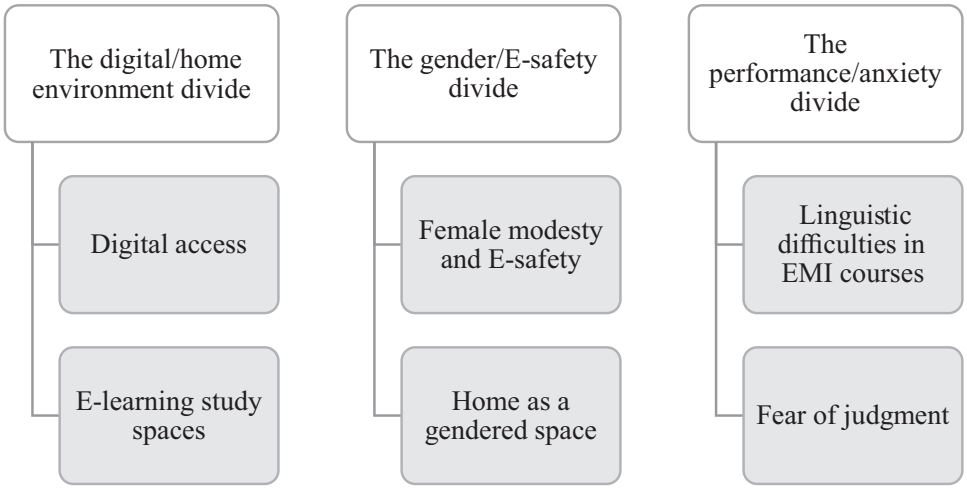


Findings related to Research Question 2 revealed three central intersecting identity aspects affecting E-learning experiences with two sub-themes stemming from each (Figure 2).

The following subsections (5.1, 5.2, 5.3) will explore each of the three central intersecting identity aspects with representative quotes from students' reflective writing. A fourth subsection (5.4) will explore the challenges of camera-less and microphone-less E-learning from students' perspectives.

Figure 2

RQ2) Intersecting identity aspects impacting the experience of E-learning in the COVID-19 pandemic.



5.1. The digital/home environment divide

The first central theme discussed in students' written reflections relates to inequalities around access to E-learning, such as technical issues, internet connection, and the suitability of home environments for online studying.

5.1.1. Digital access

Students discussed the existence of a "digital divide," reflecting on how some learners benefited from having access to high-speed internet and their own devices while others suffered due to internet connectivity issues or restricted access to a device, as voiced by F5, F41, and M28.

> *Every student uses a different laptop and has different financial levels, some students won't be able to afford microphones due to the good ones being somewhat expensive, therefore will use the laptop's mic which sometimes can cause loud frustrating echoes.* (F5)
>
> *Online teaching is not as easy as some people think, not everyone can have internet access 24/7.* (F41)
>
> *Many students suffer financially which can cause the lack of access to the technology needed for online classes. Some schools made efforts to distribute tablets and laptops to students, which is not the case in my university.* (M28)

5.1.2. E-learning study space

A further reoccurring factor that students discussed was the unsuitability of some home environments as E-learning spaces. Homes were often considered inadequate due to noise, lack of space and private areas, and large families. Such conditions are common in the UAE, where Emirati university students most often live with their parents, extended family, and younger siblings, who are also studying online. It is also not uncommon for students to be parents themselves, looking after young children or babies. F32, F10, and M9 reflect on such dynamics.

> *Every house is different. Some people are prepared, and the other ones are not. Not all of them have the ambiance for it.* (F32)
>
> *A lot of students don't live alone and have to deal with big families and annoying siblings. This means that their environment is very noisy. When she wants to say something serious, someone screams.* (F10)
>
> *Sometimes there are some students who have kids in their house or animals or birds making sounds that might disturb others. Not everyone has a private quiet place to sit and study.* (M9)

5.2. The gender/E-safety divide

A second central theme in students' writing relates to E-safety and home as a gendered space. The home is considered a private space in Muslim families in the UAE. There are also religious and cultural beliefs around female modesty. These cultural and religious norms affect online learning in that front stage and backstage spaces cannot be comfortably combined (Goffman, 1959).

5.2.1. Privacy of home and women/E-safety

The need for privacy was a common reason given for students not wanting to use video cameras for online learning. Although this factor may be presumed to disadvantage only female learners, male students felt they were also unable to use video cameras due to female relatives being in the family room where the internet connection was strongest, as voiced by M7, M27, M30, and F29.

> *In the middle of the class, you could see someone from the students' family walking behind them, and this is especially problematic for us Muslims as other people seeing our women is considered inappropriate.* (M7)

> *In the UAE, students are not forced to use cameras during daily online classes due to our privacy, because in our religion, home privacy is supposed to be known and shown to family members only*. (M27)

> *Students might have a bad internet connection and the best connection is most likely in the family room and females will be walking and probably it will be hard for the student to keep opening the camera.* (M30)

> *It's hard for some families. Especially for the girls, it is not allowed to open the cameras or even the microphones. To be specific, some parents let their daughters cover her face and not allow anyone to see her face*. (F29)

E-safety, which affects both genders but especially females, was another concern students voiced. Students worried that synchronous platforms such as Zoom could be video recorded by third-party members or meetings could be Zoom-bombed. Others raised concerns about photographs being taken without their knowledge leading to blackmailing and damaging their reputations, as voiced by F11, F55, M20, M25, and M28.

> *Students get worried that other students may be recording and taking videos of them which they can later on share with anyone. There have been incidents where videos of students and teachers went viral globally. Once a post is spread online it then becomes very difficult or sometimes impossible to be removed*. (F11)

> *There is the possibility of viruses on the computer, and thus the images can be captured and used in a bad way. These things happen a lot in electronic devices, which cause many problems for a person, including blackmailing a person and displaying his pictures.* (F55)

> *Showing your face online is a big risk itself because the internet has black spots everywhere. There is a risk of a student being exposed to social media in a bad way which could harm their own reputation. Students are better knowing that their privacy is secured and to simply learn using dedicated websites and apps until everything goes back to normal.* (M20).

> *One of the most spoken about issues is the breach of privacy and security and the students may feel unsafe or not relaxed during these classes. For instance, Zoom calls can be leaked or recorded by third-party members that reveal an excessive amount if personal details which puts a person at risk.* (M25)

> *I view that turning on video means allowing others into my home. Zoom is not 100% secure as evidenced by "Zoom bombers" who have infiltrated classes, often sharing participants' personal information. It could reach points where the content of the video could expose the location of my home.* (M28)

One male student (M18) suggested that schools and universities issue consent forms regarding video cameras and microphones for online learning to relieve students' pressure to make this decision themselves.

> *Parents may not be comfortable with their kids to be on camera while it is being recorded as they may have cultural beliefs, or it is part of a family rule. I think the university should send out consent forms that would allow students and parents to sign and give the parents the opportunity to choose to stay on the safe side.* (M18)

5.2.2. Home as a gendered space

Although cultural and religious beliefs around female modesty affected the online learning experiences of both female and male students, cultural perceptions of home as a gendered space meant that female students often had expectations placed upon them to help with childcare and housework. This was voiced directly in the case of F18 and indirectly in the case of F15 and M35.

> *I understand that it can be very frustrating for the professor at times because they are not getting any interaction from students … from a student's point of view, I have many members in my house including children and it's very difficult to keep children entertained for two hours as they have a short attention span.* (F18)

> *Some students might be parents and so it will be hard for them to keep their children quiet while the camera and the microphone are on. As we know, children are very playful and like to discover new things and will try to interrupt the class to see what is going on.* (F15)

> *Some students may have to multitask by caring for children. Opening cameras and microphones might be humiliating and distracting.* (M35)

5.3. The performance/anxiety divide

A third central theme to emerge from students' reflective writing was anxiety around performance, which in some cases related to English proficiency, and anxiety around being watched and/or judged by others in online spaces.

5.3.1. Performance difficulties/language anxiety

Students voiced performance anxieties, which were, in some cases, related to English proficiency. As there is often a wide range of English proficiency levels in any given class, often due to differences in the medium of instruction of schools they formally attended, some students were concerned about making errors or "saying something wrong" (F6) or "not right" (M18) in front of others, as voiced by F6 and M18. Concerns about academic performance were often tied to psychological health and well-being, as expressed by F36.

> *I hate microphones because it makes me feel shy. I am scared of saying something wrong without noticing.* (F6)
>
> *Students would be able to answer a question in a more enhanced way if they were not on a camera and no one will be looking at them and they will not be part of an awkward situation if they said something that is not right or that might sound funny.* (M18)
>
> *Teachers should let students have the option [to use or not use microphones and cameras] because of the negative impacts on their psychological health and their academic performance.* (F36)

5.3.2. Fear of judgement/fear of being watched by others

Not only did performance anxiety affect students, but also fear of judgment from others. Many commented on being distracted by their own image rather than focusing on the lesson's content, and others were concerned about classmates seeing a close-up image of their faces, as seen in F61, F5, M33, and M34's comments.

> *The feeling of being watched can cause nervousness and tension, thus losing focus on the material that is being taught to "how do I look right now?" or "what do they think about me?"* (F61)
>
> *Some students nowadays care a lot about their appearances and how they look in front of others, so some might put their screen as the main one*

> *and zoom out their instructor's screen and keep focusing on their hair, face, makeup, and what angle they look good in instead of focusing on the important lecture.* (F5)

> *Feeling as though everyone is watching can be distracting as students focus on how they may appear to others. This discomfort is enhanced by the fact that the faces on the screen are often large and appear very close. This can trigger the body's fight response, leaving students feeling on edge and impairing their concentration.* (M33)

> *Keeping cameras open increases stress and anxiety. I have personally encountered this because just the thought that someone is watching me and listening to me all the time is uncomfortable.* (M34)

5.4. Issues of focus, academic integrity, and rapport

Due to intersecting factors affecting students' online learning experiences seen in Figure 2 and discussed in Sections 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3, it could be argued that there are plenty of reasons for remaining with the status quo whereby Emirati university students continue online classes without using cameras and/or microphones. However, despite an overall preference for not using cameras and microphones, many students reflected on the adverse effects of camera-less classes. The main drawbacks to current camera-less online learning experiences included a lack of focus, a lack of accountability and academic integrity, and a loss of social connection and rapport. Such issues are voiced by M25, F26, M36, F52, and M21.

> *With online classes, teachers and professors are struggling with teaching classes while cameras and microphones are switched off. It's as if they are talking to a wall or themselves and no interaction is taking place. One of the advantages of having the webcam and microphone switched on is that the teachers are capable of seeing students and how they react to what's being taught. Teachers also feel more comfortable teaching their students digitally when they are able to see them and their reactions rather than just looking at a bunch of black squares.* (M25)

> *Having a stronger engagement with the teacher and actually having to sit up and face your colleagues and instructor helps make the environment more realistic and brings an actual sense of responsibility to remain fully focused and engaged during your studying hours.* (F26)

> *Nowadays, a huge amount of students join the Zoom call, wait until the Mister to take attendance, after that they will just mute the mic and go enjoy their day without caring much about the class or the information provided.* (M36)

> *The teacher has the right to see whether this person's effort is a personal effort or the effort of someone else. It will force students to follow the academic integrity that is set by their institution.* (F52)

> *In these turbulent times, I think it can help make quarantining a bit more bearable knowing that you can socialize with your classmates.* (M21)

Despite the drawbacks of camera-less online classes, students repeatedly stressed the importance of "choice" and "agency," as voiced by F24. Others offered suggestions such as short periods of camera usage in classes to help combat issues such as lack of focus and accountability without disregarding the cultural context, as seen in M36's comment.

> *Letting the students choose and not forcing them is better so they can have a better studying environment and choosing what they're comfortable with.* (F24)

> *My suggestion is opening the camera and microphone for 20 minutes in every class just to make sure the teacher has his students' full attention.* (M36)

6. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic's disruption to face-to-face education has highlighted inequities in education. Through the lens of intersectionality, the findings illuminate how multiple overlapping and interconnected social identities shape educational experiences, equity, and access (Collins & Bilge, 2020) in the context of UAE higher education. Through analysis of central themes arising in students' reflective writing, we see how identity factors such as culture, religion, gender, home environments, digital access, and language anxiety overlap in various configurations to create circles of privilege, which intersect with circles of disadvantage. For example, many of the students' reflections mentioned not only one identity category affecting the E-learning experience. Rather, they more often commented on the effects of overlapping identity categories such as being female, Muslim, part of a large family, having language learning anxiety/performance anxiety, and having inadequate WiFi and number of devices. These

factors in various configurations shaped the learning experience regarding access and engagement levels. While a vast majority of students did not agree with the mandatory use of video cameras and microphones, the drawbacks of camera-less and microphone-less learning were often commented upon. Such disadvantages include a lack of social connection, a lack of rapport with classmates and the teacher, a loss of focus, and a lack of academic integrity and accountability.

As the world edges toward a post-pandemic era, with many classes in the UAE and elsewhere continuing to be taught online or in a blended mode, a return to a "pre-pandemic normal" is challenging to picture. Instead, a "new normal" involves moving toward hybrid/blended teaching with unpredictable periods of fully online teaching in case of school closures due to COVID cases. Such a reality means that the study's context-specific challenges reflected upon by students remain relevant even in a post-pandemic period. Several suggestions can be advocated with the aim of optimizing E-learning effectiveness without compromising cultural and religious beliefs, comfort, E-safety, and privacy in post-pandemic education. The following suggestions are based on Martin and Furiv's (2020) recommendations of "innovation, flexibility, and collaboration" (IFC) for E-learning, focusing on how these concepts can be tailored to benefit learners in UAE higher education.

Firstly, educational leaders and teachers must be innovative when exploring ways to even the playing field between intersecting aspects of students' identities. In the case of the Gulf states, Islamic beliefs around privacy, which relate to E-safety, primarily affect female students, but they also affect male students in relation to female relatives sharing the home-learning space. Using movement-responsive avatars would be an innovative way to increase engagement and active participation without the discomfort of enforcing video camera use. As Hurley and Al-Ali (2021) state, avatars have "affordances that enable Arab women to be online while adhering to the contextual patriarchal bargain" (p. 787). Movement-responsive avatars mimic students' real movements, which help the teacher gauge student reactions, levels of engagement, and emotions. Professor Justin Thomas (2022) recently reported on the effectiveness of innovative avatar software after teaching his UAE university students using an avatar with lifelike gestures and emotions. His students gave the avatar-led experience a high rating. If universities make such software available and provide training sessions, female students will be provided with a way of actively engaging online without revealing their faces, in line with the *Mashrabiyya* structure. Here, there is a need to move away from the Eurocentric notion of face-showing equating to empowerment (Belting, 2017) in favor of valuing culturally responsive alternative modes of representation. In previous studies, the use of avatars for activities such as digital roleplaying and storytelling in EMI UAE universities

had the added benefit of reducing performance anxiety or "speech fright" amongst female Emirati learners (Hopkyns & Nicoll, 2014, 2018), which was an identity aspect that commonly intersected with gendered impacts of COVID-era online learning in the current study's findings. For male students, whose concerns do not center around showing their faces on camera but instead on female relatives in their home being captured on camera, classroom-appropriate Zoom backgrounds can be used to hide the actual background (Hurley, 2020). Using video cameras with Zoom backgrounds can also aid rapport between teachers and students as the backgrounds chosen can reflect the students' personalities and act as a conversation starter or ice breaker at the start of classes.

Secondly, creating more flexible pathways for learning is necessary for the post-COVID era of online and hybrid learning. Ocriciano (2020) stresses the relationship between flexibility, choice, and wellness for online learning. Flexibility is significant in the Gulf context, where many students live with large families, and female students often have gendered expectations placed upon them with regard to providing childcare. Teachers should be aware of the dynamics accompanying home as a "highly gendered space" (Hurley, 2020) and make materials accessible outside class time. Teachers can also place greater emphasis on alternative forms of communication and support. For example, using asynchronous tools such as WhatsApp can enable teachers and students to communicate in a more natural and nuanced way than via emails (Hopkyns, 2022). When teachers use the voice memo function of WhatsApp for feedback on written work, students can play this many times on their telephones and leave memos that express emotions and tone of voice. Equally, using breakout rooms on Zoom can support teacher–student and student–student rapport and lower anxiety levels (Fikry et al., 2021).

Finally, collaboration on many levels is necessary to ensure more culturally responsive and linguistically responsive pedagogy. As Giroux (2021) states, the pandemic has drawn "unprecedented attention to how interdependent we are on each other" (p. 184). Roddy et al. (2017) suggest four collaborative pillars for student success: academic support, technology support, a sense of community, and well-being. To add to Roddy et al.'s (2017) four collaborative pillars, language support is a fifth necessary pillar in EMI contexts. Content teachers need to be cognizant of the linguistic challenges and insecurities some students may experience and how this can affect their willingness to participate actively in online classes. In EMI contexts, students are often dealing with the "double burden" of learning both content and language (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Hopkyns, 2020a, 2020b) as well as self-perceptions, beliefs, and feelings that affect language performance, or "language attitude anxiety" (Attanayake, 2019). Linguistic

challenges can affect confidence, self-esteem, and motivation, especially during the COVID-19 period of E-learning, as teachers cannot easily check progress through the live monitoring of students' facial expressions and engagement (Hopkyns, 2022). The pandemic has, therefore, brought about an even stronger need for content teachers and English language teachers to come together (Jones et al., 2022; Pun & Thomas, 2020) to work toward linguistically responsive instruction (LRI). Concrete examples of LRI include ensuring clarity of instruction, providing clear models of assignments, encouraging the use of Arabic, engaging students in purposeful collaborative activities where they have chances to negotiate meaning, and minimizing the potential for anxiety (Hillman, 2021).

7. Conclusion

This article has explored intersectional social identities of Emirati university students and how these overlapping identity aspects affect their lived experiences of E-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study brought attention to a multitude of factors influencing students' reluctance to use video cameras and microphones in their online classes as well as the drawbacks of camera-less and microphone-less classes. Based on the findings, the article argues for the context-specific tailoring of online and hybrid learning toward culturally responsive and linguistically responsive pedagogy. Context-specific suggestions were made related to the key concepts of innovation, flexibility, and collaboration (IFC). To address inequities in post-COVID-era classrooms, access in all its dimensions needs to be considered, whether it be technological, personal, financial, cultural, or educational. Instead of promoting a one-size-fits-all approach, professional development sessions and social policies should aim to tailor post-pandemic E-learning and hybrid learning to students' complex and intersecting identities as learners.

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Competing Interests

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