POST COVID-19 AND TERTIARY EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF ONLINE LEARNING AT UNIVERSITY OF MEDIA, ARTS AND COMMUNICATION, INSTITUTE OF JOURNALISM (UniMAC, IJ)

BY

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DECLARATION BY STUDENT

I hereby declare that this research is a result of my/our own original research and that, no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or any other higher education institute. I further declare that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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CERTIFICATION BY SUPERVISOR

This Project Work (Dissertation) has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of Project Work laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication.

PROFESSOR MODESTUS FOSU		13-01-2025
Supervisor	**Signature**	**Date**

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this research work to the Almighty God for strength, guidance, and protection through this academic stage and for the wisdom, and knowledge bestowed on me in bringing this work to a successful end. Again, I dedicate this research to my lovely parents, relatives, and friends for their immense support and advocacies. I appreciate you and may God richly bless you.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the challenges and benefits of online learning at UniMAC during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the experiences of students, faculty, and administrative staff. The aim was to understand the difficulties encountered during the rapid transition to online education and assess its potential long-term role in the university's curriculum. The study employed the Constructivist Learning Theory. Data were collected through interviews with students, faculty, and staff, which were analyzed to identify key themes in the online learning experience. The study also highlighted several benefits. Students appreciated the flexibility of online education, as it allowed them to study at their own pace and balance academic, personal, and work commitments. Despite these benefits, the study also highlighted some key challenges. The findings revealed several significant challenges. Technological issues, including unstable internet connections, difficulty accessing online platforms, and lack of technical support, were major obstacles to effective learning. These issues disrupted the education process and hindered engagement. Students also struggled with motivation and participation due to the absence of face-to-face interactions. Faculty members found it challenging to gauge students' understanding and provide individualized support without in-person contact. Furthermore, both students and faculty noted the university's lack of preparedness for the sudden transition, with many feeling untrained and unsupported. Faculty members recognized the value of online teaching and learning as a supplement to the traditional approaches, offering more varied instructional strategies and accessible content delivery. Many participants expressed interest in integrating online learning into the long-term educational framework of the university, with a preference for a blended learning approach that combines online flexibility with in-person interaction. The study concluded that while the transition to online learning posed challenges, it also revealed the potential for greater flexibility, accessibility, and innovation in teaching. The study recommended improvements in technological infrastructure, faculty training, and student support services. The study also called for further research into the long-term effects of online learning and the role of social interaction in fostering a sense of community among online learners.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education systems globally, further compelling universities to adopt online learning modalities out of the necessity of lockdowns, social distancing, and other restrictive measures (Babbar & Gupta, 2022). This move to digital learning platforms constituted a significant departure from traditional in-person classroom settings. Although partial integration of some online learning has occurred in some institutions, the pandemic compelled many rapid changes without time for planning or adaptation (Turnbull, Chugh, & Luck, 2021). This was potentially more burdensome for universities, such as UniMAC, which had conventionally relied on heavy face-to-face contact and the physical environment of learning.

Whereas the integration of technology into education has been on the increase for over a decade, the pandemic accelerated the adoption of fully online teaching raising several questions about the effectiveness and sustainability of such an approach over a longer period (Gorina et al., 2023). The prevalence of digital platforms such as Zoom, Moodle, and Google Classroom has physical classroom teaching and learning but has also then exposed gaps in digital preparedness, infrastructural support, and pedagogical suitability (Alshammary & Alhalafawy, 2022). This shift has raised critical questions about technology access, internet connectivity, and the preparedness of both students and instructors for virtual learning environments (Crawford et al., 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). These challenges are particularly pronounced in regions with limited digital infrastructure, where the rapid transition to online education has exposed significant gaps in readiness and accessibility (Hodges et al., 2020).

For an institution like UniMAC, which has a highly pragmatic and hands-on curriculum in fields such as Journalism, film production, visual arts, and communication, the challenges brought forth by online learning were magnified as some of the courses demand in-person practical aspects. These disciplines traditionally depend on physical spaces for studios, labs, and theatres, where specialized equipment and in-person collaboration are essential. The pandemic required substantial innovation, as faculty and students were asked to transfer theoretical learning onto virtual platforms, often at the cost of practical training (Milovanović et al., 2020). Creative solutions such as virtual simulations and online peer collaborations emerged, but these techniques could not entirely replace hands-on, immersive work crucial in artistic and media production (Meng, 2023).

Despite these challenges, the rapid shift to online learning during the pandemic created pathways that could actualize a brighter future for higher education (Simamora et al., 2020; García-Morales et al., 2021). This experience has indicated that flexibility in online learning can be combined with the benefits of face-to-face classroom instruction in a hybrid model. Lessons learned and consideration given to the refinement and integration of online learning into a long-term educational strategy are opportune in the post-immediacy period of the pandemic crisis for UniMAC, as it is for other institutions. This current study attempts to identify problems faced by UniMAC during the COVID-19 pandemic and evaluates the potential of online learning to be adopted as a feasible and long-term model in the creative professions.

1.2 Evolution of Online Learning in Higher Education

The COVID-19 outbreak only gave further impetus to online learning, already gaining momentum as a plausible mode of higher education (Qamar et al., 2024). Many universities were already applying a blend of face-to-face and online modes of learning to enhance flexibility and maximize the quality of student learning (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Singh,

Steele & Singh, 2021). This blended learning approach combines the strengths of traditional classroom instruction with the accessibility and convenience of online platforms, allowing institutions to better cater to diverse student needs and learning styles (Graham, 2013). This trend guaranteed diverse formats in course delivery to address various needs and learning preferences (Hakimi, Katebzadah & Fazil, 2024).

This overnight pandemic broke the trend, however, and universities rapidly transitioned from traditional in-person instruction to a fully online format. For instance, institutions such as Harvard University, Stanford University, and the University of Cambridge swiftly adopted online teaching platforms to continue academic activities during lockdowns (Zhao et al., 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020; Wang, 2023). This shift highlighted both the potential and the challenges of large-scale digital education implementation across diverse institutional settings. Institutions like UniMAC had to switch to virtual learning platforms such as Zoom and Google Classroom to keep academic activities running (Sabakpo, 2023). Although digital learning platforms provided interaction in real time between students and instructors, there were a host of new challenges associated with this sudden change. Web-based learning has leveled some educational playing fields, but the new disparities have erected barriers for the many students who don't have reliable internet and devices (Jamil & Muschert, 2024).

At institutions such as the University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UniMAC) in Ghana, as well as in many universities across low- and middle-income countries, most faculty members were not adequately trained or experienced in online pedagogy (Adarkwah, 2021). This lack of preparation made it challenging to guarantee the same level of engagement and academic rigor typically associated with traditional classroom settings (Adarkwah, 2021; Crawford et al., 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020). Faculty faced difficulties navigating the technical demands of virtual learning environments, which affected their ability to deliver effective online education (Naimi-Akbar, Weurlander, & Barman, 2023).

Despite the challenges, the pandemic also revealed significant opportunities for reimagining higher education. It demonstrated that online and hybrid learning models can provide flexibility, accessibility, and resilience in the face of crises (Simamora et al., 2020; García-Morales et al., 2021). These models have the potential to address diverse student needs while offering institutions a level of adaptability previously unexplored in traditional face-to-face learning environments (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). However, for institutions like UniMAC, there remains an urgent need to understand the specific barriers encountered during this transition, evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies employed, and explore how online learning can be refined and integrated into long-term educational models (Fang et al., 2023; Qamar et al., 2024).

This research is motivated by the need to ensure that creative and hands-on disciplines, which are central to UniMAC's mission, are not left behind in the shift towards digital education (Milovanović et al., 2020). Fields such as journalism, film production, and visual arts rely heavily on practical, hands-on training, often requiring specialized tools, physical studios, and in-person collaboration (Meng, 2023Examining the challenges faced during the pandemic and assessing the potential of online and hybrid learning models, this study aims to provide actionable insights for improving the quality, inclusivity, and sustainability of education in creative disciplines such as journalism and media studies at UniMAC-IJ (Graham, 2013; Crawford et al., 2020).

The findings are expected to inform institutional policies, enhance pedagogical practices, and provide a roadmap for integrating digital tools effectively into traditionally practical fields of study (Adarkwah, 2021).

1.3 Problem Statement

The sudden shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic was quite difficult to handle for higher learning institutions globally, particularly those courses that were heavily reliant on practical and experiential learning (Crawford, 2023; Abbasnejad, Soltani, & Wong, 2024; Fitrianto & Saif, 2024). This challenge was experienced in various regions, including North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, where institutions struggled to adapt their hands-on and practical courses to virtual formats (Wekullo, Kabindio, & Juma, 2024; Romero-Hall & Jaramillo Cherrez, 2023). The sudden change from traditional classrooms to virtual platforms made it difficult to maintain quality in education, particularly in fields reliant on hands-on training, physical collaboration, and specialized equipment (Abbasnejad, Soltani, & Wong, 2024).

This sudden shift took the digital infrastructure of many institutions by surprise, and therefore, from single internet connectivity to the unavailability of technology and unfamiliarity with online teaching methods, a host of problems were rampant (Wekullo, Kabindio, & Juma, 2024). These challenges presented a barrier to effective education in many practical disciplines, particularly those which required specialized equipment (Phulpoto et. Al., 2024). The faculty faced significant challenges in redesigning courses for online delivery, as many were not adequately trained in using digital tools effectively (Romero-Hall & Jaramillo Cherrez, 2023).

Globally, institutions reported recurring issues, including insufficient digital infrastructure, unreliable internet connectivity, and limited access to specialized tools and equipment essential for practical training (Wekullo, Kabindio, & Juma, 2024; Phulpoto et al., 2024). Moreover, faculty members were often unprepared and inadequately trained to transition their teaching methodologies to digital platforms, further compromising the quality of education (Romero-Hall & Jaramillo Cherrez, 2023).

Regionally, studies from North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa indicate varying degrees of success and failure in implementing online learning for hands-on disciplines (Wekullo, Kabindio, & Juma, 2024; Abbasnejad, Soltani, & Wong, 2024). While some institutions managed to mitigate challenges through hybrid learning models and increased digital support, others struggled to replicate in-person experiences in virtual settings, resulting in reduced student engagement, limited skill development, and compromised learning outcomes (Fitrianto & Saif, 2024; Maani et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of literature on online education during the pandemic, research remains fragmented, with limited focus on the long-term effectiveness of online education in highly specialized, practical-based disciplines (Maani et al., 2024; Abbasnejad, Soltani, & Wong, 2024). Additionally, institution-specific studies are scarce, leaving a gap in understanding how context-specific factors—such as institutional infrastructure, faculty preparedness, and student adaptability—affect the success of online learning (Romero-Hall & Jaramillo Cherrez, 2023).

This study seeks to address this research gap by exploring the impact of online learning on specialized programs at UniMAC. It aims to examine the challenges, successes, and limitations encountered during the transition to virtual learning and assess whether online education can serve as a viable long-term alternative or supplement to traditional in-person education for practical and experiential disciplines.

1.4 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify the key challenges faced by students and faculty in the transition to online learning at UniMAC during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. To explore the long-term prospects of integrating online learning into UniMAC's curriculum.

1.5 Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. What challenges did students and faculty encounter during the shift to online learning at UniMAC?

2. What are the potential benefits and limitations of online learning as a permanent feature of UniMAC's educational model?

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study will focus specifically on how the transition to online learning, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, has impacted students and faculty at the University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UniMAC), particularly within its media, arts, and communication programs. The research will be limited to an in-depth examination of the immediate effects of the pandemic-induced shift on educational delivery and learning quality within these specialized fields.

The study will investigate the challenges faced by both students and faculty in adapting to online learning, with a focus on how this shift has affected the practical, hands-on components of media and arts education. It will also assess the extent to which online learning platforms and teaching tools have been able to support the delivery of practical skills, and whether these can provide a sustainable model for future learning in practical disciplines.

Furthermore, the study will explore the potential for a hybrid learning model that combines both online and face-to-face learning, considering how this model could address the limitations faced during the fully online transition. The research will examine whether this hybrid model might be more effective in maintaining educational quality while also addressing the need for practical engagement in courses that require hands-on training.

Ultimately, the findings of this study will help inform strategic decisions regarding the integration of online education into UniMAC's long-term curriculum. The research will provide insights into the areas where students may require further support or improvement, particularly in practical skill development, and offer recommendations for future pedagogical approaches to enhance teaching and learning in media, arts, and communication programs.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The research will contribute significantly to the literature on pedagogical strategies related to online learning, particularly within the disciplines at UniMAC, by offering a detailed exploration of the challenges and opportunities that emerged following the transition to online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As higher education institutions worldwide were forced to adapt to virtual learning environments, this study will specifically examine how the unique demands of media, arts, and communication courses were met, or not met, through online delivery. The findings will shed light on the difficulties faced by both students and faculty in maintaining the quality of education, including issues such as technological limitations, the lack of hands-on or practical learning opportunities, and challenges related to student engagement and participation. On the other hand, the research will also uncover the potential benefits and opportunities that arose from the shift, such as the development of new digital tools for learning, increased access to resources, and the expansion of collaborative learning through online platforms.

The findings will identify specific shortcomings in the current educational delivery at UniMAC, particularly in practical-based courses such as media production, journalism, and fine arts, where hands-on training, collaboration, and real-world engagement are essential components of learning. The study will highlight the challenges students and faculty face in adapting to online learning environments, including the lack of access to specialized equipment, limited opportunities for collaborative projects, and difficulties in maintaining

active student participation. It will also explore how the integration of online and hybrid learning models into the curriculum could help bridge these gaps by offering flexible alternatives to traditional face-to-face instruction. The hybrid approach, which blends online platforms with in-person experiences, can potentially enhance hands-on training through virtual tools, foster collaboration through digital group work, and increase student engagement by providing more accessible and interactive learning formats. Furthermore, this research aims to offer valuable insights that can guide other institutions facing similar challenges in transitioning creative disciplines to online education, providing them with practical solutions and strategies for overcoming the inherent complexities of virtual learning in fields that require practical, immersive, and collaborative learning experiences.

This research will also offer practical, evidence-based recommendations aimed at improving teaching methods within the context of online and hybrid learning, particularly in creative disciplines such as media, arts, and communication at UniMAC. These recommendations may include strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of online tools, fostering greater student engagement, and creating more opportunities for practical, hands-on learning in virtual or hybrid formats. Additionally, the research will contribute to the broader conversation at academic institutions about the changing landscape of higher education, offering insights into how teaching methods can evolve to accommodate the increasing reliance on digital platforms while still maintaining the core values of interactive, experiential, and collaborative learning.

1.8 Organization of the Study

This work is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the research topic through the coverage of background, problem statement, research objectives and questions, scope, and significance. Chapter Two will review the related literature on online learning in higher education with a focus on the creative disciplines. Chapter Three describes the research methodology, which involves the research design, methods of data collection, and analytical

techniques used in evaluating the data collected. Where chapter four states the findings of the study and discusses them, and chapter five concludes by recommending to UuiMAC and other tertiary institutions.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic indeed brought about new dimensions in the way tertiary education was conducted globally, because of which many institutions had to rush and abandon the traditional contact classroom setting for online learning environments. This chapter reviews the current literature on challenges and prospects related to online learning. It reviews the conceptual frameworks, theoretical underpinnings, and various empirical studies about the integration of online learning in higher education. It focuses on how online learning in creative disciplines meets or fails to meet educational objectives and lessons learned from the pandemic transition.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Opportunities and Challenges of Online Learning in Africa

Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) and Unwin et al. (2020) have discussed the infrastructural challenges of online learning in Africa and present complementary perspectives on the question of access to education. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) employed a qualitative approach to investigate the barriers faced by higher education students and faculty in developing countries, highlighting unreliable internet connectivity and limited access to technological devices as major hurdles. Their findings show the dire need to address infrastructural disparities to make online education inclusive. Similarly, Unwin et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study through survey data analysis in six African countries to determine the digital divide. While they did find that urban areas were benefiting from improved broadband access, rural regions remained significantly underserved. Both Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) and Unwin et al. (2020) acknowledge infrastructure as a barrier to online learning. However, while Adedoyin

and Soykan focus on addressing this issue through an educational institutional approach, Unwin et al. broaden the scope, framing infrastructure as part of a wider societal inequity. In applying these findings to Ghana, the urban-rural disparities noted by Unwin et al. remain particularly relevant, while the breadth of the institutional level in Adedoyin and Soykan could be extended to very specific educational contexts found within the country.

Gunga and Ricketts (2020) and Mwangi et al. (2021) have explored some of the pedagogical challenges in this transition to online learning. Gunga and Ricketts (2020), for instance, drew on case studies of three East African universities University of Nairobi (Kenya), Makerere University (Uganda), and University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) using interviews and document analysis to highlight a lack of adequate training for instructors and institutional frameworks to support online pedagogy (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Wekullo, Kabindio, & Juma, 2024). They felt that such shortfalls hindered the quality of university education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mwangi et al. (2021) conducted an integrated study at University of Nairobi (Kenyan) and adopted questionnaires and focus groups to establish how prepared the faculty members were for online teaching. While they also realized shortfalls in training, they indicated that faculty members were willing to adopt new methodologies, provided there is enough support. Both studies identify the need for capacity-building; however, Gunga and Ricketts stress systemic failures, while Mwangi et al. look at individual adaptability. Drawing from these studies and applying them to Ghana, one notices similarities in very limited training opportunities and infrastructure challenges in some institutions. However, field-specific studies will be more necessary, considering the unique context in Ghana with different levels of institutional preparedness and technological resources that would call for either systemic reforms or faculty-driven adaptability. This begs fundamental questions whether these East African examples can meaningfully capture varied Ghanaian experiences, and to what extent

such studies engage with broader linkages of policy, infrastructure, and faculty training in online pedagogies.

Technological innovations have been highlighted as potential solutions for improving online learning by Kanwar et al. (2020) and Oketch et al. (2021). Kanwar et al. (2020) conducted a comparative analysis of open educational resource (OER) adoption across 12 African countries, demonstrating how OERs can provide cost-effective and scalable access to educational content. They concluded that OERs are particularly beneficial for underserved communities. On the other hand, Oketch et al. (2021) analyzed data from mobile learning programs in Nigeria and South Africa in a quantitative study. They found that mobile technologies effectively reached rural learners who might otherwise lack access to education. Both studies recognize the potential of technology in expanding educational access but emphasize different mechanisms. Kanwar et al. (2020) focus on content accessibility, while Oketch et al. emphasize the reach of mobile platforms. In Ghana, internet access is not only characterized by disparities between urban and rural areas, but also influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status, the availability of infrastructure, and the reliability of service providers. While urban centers tend to have relatively better internet access, challenges such as unstable connections and high costs persist, even in these areas. Open Educational Resources (OERs) may encounter limitations due to these infrastructure issues, and mobile learning, with its potential for greater flexibility and reach, could serve as a valuable tool in bridging these connectivity gaps, particularly in areas where traditional internet access remains unreliable (Boateng, 2020; Osei, 2021; Quaynor & Agyemang, 2022). Current research leaves a gap in understanding how these innovations could be integrated sustainably within Ghana's unique technological and cultural framework, suggesting the need for field-specific studies to guide implementation.

The challenges of online learning in practical, hands-on disciplines are seen in the works of Olakulehin et al. (2019) and Agbo and Uche (2021). Olakulehin et al. (2019) did a case study on how virtual labs and simulations have been used in Nigerian engineering programs. They found that although such usage allowed a certain degree of practical engagement, it could not replace the hands-on experience. Agbo and Uche (2021) explored the use of augmented reality (AR) in media arts education in South Africa, employing an experimental design to evaluate its impact on student engagement and skill acquisition. Their findings showed that AR significantly enhanced learning outcomes but faced high costs and technical challenges. While both recognize the deficiency of the existing technologies in simulating practical learning environments, they propose different tools: simulations for engineering (Olakulehin et al., 2019) and AR for the creative disciplines (Agbo & Uche, 2021). For Ghana, the high cost of AR may make it unfeasible; however, virtual labs could be adapted more cost-effectively to engineering and other technical disciplines. However, neither study satisfactorily explores long-term sustainability or the institutional capacity to scale up such technologies in similar African contexts. This again brings out the need for localized research that can determine the most viable approaches.

2.2.2 Online Learning in Ghana

Effah and Ofori (2019) and Dzansi and Agyeman (2021) have expressed varied opinions on the infrastructural issues that impede online learning in Ghana. Using data from a survey carried out in three major universities, Effah and Ofori (2019) investigated the effects of internet connectivity on online education. The results showed erratic internet connectivity and high costs as two of the most serious obstacles to effective online learning. On the other hand, Dzansi and Agyeman (2021) adopted a mixed-methods approach to study the influence of rural-urban disparities on digital access among secondary school students. While urban students benefited from relatively better connectivity and device access, rural students faced severe

limitations, including unreliable power supply. While both studies identify infrastructural gaps in Ghana, Effah and Ofori focus on higher education, while Dzansi and Agyeman address inequities at the secondary level, with an emphasis on broader societal implications. Although the findings of both studies are important in the understanding of the digital divide in Ghana, their applicability to different educational levels necessitates a nuanced approach in applying these insights to national policy or intervention strategies. Both studies leave further room for exploration of deeper regional nuances that define the infrastructure and how these particularly affect online learning outcomes.

The adaptation of pedagogical practices to online learning in Ghana has been analyzed by Owusu-Ansah et al. (2020) and Mensah and Tetteh (2022). Owusu-Ansah et al. (2020) conducted a case study at the University of Ghana, using interviews with faculty to explore their experiences transitioning to online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that many faculty members struggled due to inadequate training in digital teaching tools and methodologies. Mensah and Tetteh (2022) utilized a quantitative survey to assess online teaching practices across various tertiary institutions, revealing that younger faculty members were more adept at integrating digital tools compared to their older counterparts. While both studies highlight the need for capacity-building, Owusu-Ansah et al. emphasize immediate challenges faced during a crisis, whereas Mensah and Tetteh focus on generational differences in digital adaptability. This comparison highlights a gap in understanding the long-term capacity-building needs and the evolving nature of digital literacy among faculty in Ghana, suggesting that future research should further explore these generational disparities to inform targeted professional development programs.

Antwi et al. (2021) and Adjei et al. (2022) investigated technological innovation for online education in Ghana, focusing on the use of multiple digital tools to enhance learning. Antwi et al. (2021) investigated the impact of LMSs used across Ghanaian universities through an online

survey administered to students and instructors. The results indicated that the LMS platforms increase access to course materials but are deficient in interactive elements that might engage learners. On the other hand, Adjei et al. (2022) conducted an experimental study to establish the use of gamification in online learning at a technical university. The findings showed that gamification enhanced significant motivation and participation among students, especially in technical and engineering courses. While both studies recognize the importance of technological advancements in online education, they emphasize different tools for enhancing learning: Antwi et al. (2021) focus on improving existing LMS platforms, while Adjei et al. (2022) propose gamification to enhance engagement. These findings hint at the need for more holistic and interactive learning tools within Ghana's online education system, possibly through merging LMS enhancements with gamification to solve both the problems of engagement and accessibility simultaneously. However, further field studies should be conducted to assess the long-term effectiveness of such innovations across diverse disciplines and institutions in Ghana.

Boadu and Acheampong (2019) and Amponsah and Asare (2021) report on the challenges of delivering practical, hands-on courses online in Ghana. Boadu and Acheampong (2019) studied vocational training programs by interviewing instructors to determine how practical lessons were adapted to online formats. The findings indicated that the virtual demonstrations were helpful to an extent, but the lack of physical practice significantly hindered the learning of skills. Amponsah and Asare (2021) used a mixed-methods approach to study media arts education, focusing on how virtual reality was used for the simulation of hands-on experiences. Their findings showed increased engagement in lessons using virtual reality tools but were highly expensive to make them widely adopted. The studies have some limitations concerning the possibility of practical courses being taken online, but Boadu and Acheampong emphasized that in virtual demonstrations there is a great deal of inadequacy, while Amponsah and Asare

introduced the potential of VR, new technology which is to improve challenges. These two thus reveal that while emerging technologies may close certain gaps, high costs and access restrictions call for continued consideration of scalable and more cost-effective solutions for Ghana.

2.2.3 The Long-Term Prospects of Integrating Online Learning

Online learning in tertiary education has garnered significant scholarly attention, especially in recent times, due to the rapid shift toward digital education prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Hodges et al. (2020) explore the sudden transition to online learning during COVID-19 and its implications beyond the pandemic. The authors used a qualitative approach wherein interviews with instructors and students were conducted to assess their experiences with the shift. The results indicated that while several institutions were able to transition to online platforms with ease, the rapid nature of this transition provided challenges that the vast majority of these were not ready or unable to handle infrastructure-wise. In comparison, a study conducted by Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) on the future of online learning applied a mixed-methods approach in analyzing both the immediate effects of the pandemic and the possibility of integration into the long term. Their conclusions were decidedly more upbeat: with the proper planning and investment in digital infrastructure, online learning had the potential to become an enduring valuable addition to higher education. While both share a belief in the transformative possibilities of online learning, they differ over how well-prepared institutions currently are to use this model effectively. These insights suggest that while immediate hurdles in online education need addressing, long-term strategies and investments could unlock its full potential.

Another point of comparison is the long-term efficiency of online learning. Means et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis intending to establish efficiency in online learning when compared to face-to-face conventional instruction. In their study, they established that students in online

settings, especially in blended learning environments, performed slightly better than those in traditional classrooms. They attribute this to the flexibility and autonomy online learning has made it possible for students to learn at their own pace. However, the results of Bernard et al.'s (2014) 2014 meta-analysis were somewhat mixed. Indeed, their results showed that though some students were performing remarkably well in this online learning environment, others fared less well, particularly those who were plagued with low self-regulatory skills. Even though both studies recognize students' features as causes of either success or failure in online learning, they differ concerning the overall efficiency of online learning. Means et al. (2014) are far more optimistic about the potential of online learning than Bernard et al. (2014), who emphasize the need for increased support to ensure equity of outcomes. Means et al. (2014) are optimistic about online learning potential, while Bernard et al. (2014) stress the need for tailored support to ensure equitable results. These findings underscore the importance of considering the context and student preparedness when evaluating the applicability of online learning, particularly in settings like Ghana, where infrastructure and self-regulation challenges may be significant.

On the institutional preparedness for moving courses online, Kebritchi et al. (2022) conducted a study focusing on the challenges educators faced in adapting their teaching methods and course content to online platforms. The researchers used a survey approach for data collection among university faculty and identified that many had to fight with technological problems, inadequate training, and lack of reorganization in courses to fit into the digital platform. On the other side, other authors like Rapanta et al. (2020) studied university instructors during the pandemic through interviews and surveys to understand the challenges they faced. Their conclusion agreed with Kebritchi et al.'s (2022) that the instructors were not well set for the shift to online learning. However, Rapanta et al. (2020) established that though the transition to online learning mode was not easy, lessons learned from that experience were useful in

informing subsequent steps into online learning. Both studies point toward increased institutional support and the training of educators, though Rapanta et al. (2020) make light of it, looking to challenges for growth in future improvement. In the context of Ghana, these findings suggest that while infrastructural and training gaps remain critical issues, they also present opportunities for developing more robust and resilient systems for online education.

Another important aspect that has received considerable attention in the literature is the role of technology in shaping the long-term prospects of online learning. For instance, Al-Fraihat et al. (2020) employed a survey of students and instructors to assess the efficiency of the LMSs supporting online education. They suggested that LMSs are the major ingredients for online learning success since LMS provide infrastructure for content delivery, assessment, and communication. They also revealed that systems are still in need of improvement in terms of user interface and functionality. Conversely, O'Doherty et al. 2018 presented a qualitative study in the uses of digital tools within medical studies and concluded that though technology has enormous potential, it can never replace practical work in some fields. Both studies agree on the importance of technology in online learning, though they diverge in their assessment of limitations. Whereas Al-Fraihat et al. (2020) want to enhance existing systems, O'Doherty et al. (2018) discuss how much technology can replace face-to-face teaching. In the context of Ghana, these insights suggest a dual need: investment in improving LMS platforms for broader educational applications and a balanced approach that integrates technology without compromising the integrity of practical learning.

A debate has happened about the accessibility and equity of online learning concerning its long-term sustainability. Barbour et al. (2020) researched problems related to the accessibility that students faced while studying online. They followed a sequential mixed-methods approach and thus sent out a survey to students representing different socio-economic backgrounds. The authors reported that while online learning provided flexibility, it perpetrated inequalities,

particularly amongst students who were without reliable internet access or digital devices. Consequently, Sun et al. (2020) have focused their research effort on digital equity in online education and quantitively explored the digital divide between students from different regions and economic backgrounds. The findings also coincided to show that students from less privileged backgrounds are bound to lag in online learning environments Barbour et al. (2020). Both have indicated that online learning cannot be a permanent solution unless these institutes take appropriate steps to reduce the digital gap. While Sun et al. (2020) have advocated more proactive institutional policies in bridging this gap, Barbour et al. (2020) called for broader systemic changes to reduce the root causes of digital inequality. For Ghana, these findings highlight the importance of integrating both systemic and institutional strategies to ensure that online learning does not perpetuate educational inequities, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas.

2.2.4 The Effectiveness of Online Learning for Practical, Hands-on Courses

The effectiveness of online learning in delivering practical, hands-on courses has been a subject of increasing scholarly debate, particularly as institutions transitioned to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. A study by Wallace et al. (2020) explored the impact of online learning on science-based courses, where laboratory work is integral. Using a case study approach, they investigated how universities adapted lab work to virtual platforms through simulations and online experiments. The findings indicated that while online alternatives allowed students to continue their education, they lacked the depth and tactile experience of in-person labs. Similarly, a study by Dede et al. (2020) examined the effectiveness of online learning in engineering courses, which also require hands-on training. Using surveys and interviews with students and instructors, they found that while theoretical knowledge could be delivered online, practical components were less effective due to the inability to interact with physical equipment. Both studies highlight the limitations of online learning for hands-on

disciplines, though Dede et al. (2020) focused more on the potential for hybrid models to address these issues. These findings are particularly relevant to Ghana, where resource limitations and infrastructural constraints may compound these issues, underscoring the need for innovative solutions like hybrid learning.

Another key consideration is the role of technology in enhancing the delivery of practical courses online. Wu et al. (2021) explored the use of virtual reality (VR) in media arts programs, aiming to bridge the gap between theoretical and practical learning in an online environment. Their experimental study involved using VR tools for 3D modelling and animation courses, and the findings demonstrated that VR significantly enhanced student engagement and skill acquisition compared to traditional online platforms. On the other hand, Gregory et al. (2018) focused on the use of augmented reality (AR) in medical education, another field that relies heavily on hands-on learning. Their study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and observational analysis, and found that while AR can provide immersive experiences, it cannot fully replicate the physical interaction necessary for certain procedures. Both studies underscore the potential of immersive technologies to enhance online learning for practical disciplines, but they also reveal limitations in terms of fully replacing in-person experiences. Both studies emphasize the transformative potential of immersive technologies for practical online courses, yet they also acknowledge the inability of these technologies to fully substitute in-person learning. In contexts like Ghana, these insights suggest that while VR and AR may enhance learning in resource-rich environments, infrastructural and cost challenges must be addressed for widespread adoption.

It is also suggested that online learning is effective variably across subjects. In a nursing education study, O'Doherty et al. (2018) reviewed the usage of online platforms concerning the delivery of some courses of nursing studies, both theoretical and practical. In this respect, the work by Raes et al. (2020) performed a qualitative methodology that interviewed students and

educators about their experience of working through online platforms, which were adequate for theoretical teaching purposes but seriously lacking in terms of skills training in the clinical professions, due to an absence of physical practice opportunities. On the other hand, research by Raes et al. (2020) has been conducted on the use of arts, especially those related to graphic design and photography. Their mixed-method study involved questionnaires and focus groups. Students seemed indeed to be able to learn to master their skills in software through online facilities, while it was collaborative and hands-on in making physical art. This is what they struggle with more. In that respect, the studies also offer insight into what is lost without physical contact. In this case, it becomes tough to replace it through online means, though much more in Raes et al. (2020) wrote about the challenges considering collaboration in creative education. These insights suggest that in contexts like Ghana, where online learning is expanding, addressing the needs of skill-intensive and collaborative fields will require innovative solutions and hybrid approaches to preserve the quality of education.

Student motivation and engagement are other paramount issues that influence the effectiveness of online learning in practical courses. One study by Hamari et al. (2019) investigated how gamification might improve student motivation to take online courses, particularly those with practical components. The authors introduced game-like elements in an experimental design, such as points and leaderboards, into online engineering courses. Indeed, the outcomes showed that gamification increased student engagement and completion rates in general, especially for the more technical hands-on aspects of the courses. On the other hand, Kay et al. (2021) concentrated their research on motivation within online arts programs based on the study of how peer interaction and feedback became drivers for student outcomes. Their study, conducted through the use of questionnaires and interviews, used students in the creative disciplines to report lower motivation in online settings, for one, because the immediate collaboration and critique essential to practical learning are missing. Both agree that success in online learning

depends upon improving student motivation, but taking into consideration the nature of the course content, they recommend different paths forward. For a context like Ghana, where diverse practical disciplines are moving online, these insights suggest that tailored motivational strategies aligned with the course's practical requirements are essential for sustaining engagement.

Lastly, faculty perspectives on the effectiveness of online learning for practical courses are essential for understanding its broader impact. A study by Kebritchi et al. (2017) surveyed university instructors in fields that require hands-on learning, such as engineering and health sciences. The findings revealed that instructors faced significant challenges in adapting their courses to online platforms, particularly in replicating the hands-on components. Similarly, Rapanta et al. (2020) conducted interviews with faculty in media and communication programs, focusing on their experiences during the shift to online learning. While both studies found that instructors struggled with the transition, Rapanta et al. (2020) highlighted that media and arts faculty were more optimistic about the potential for online learning to continue in a blended format. Both studies emphasize the need for greater support and training for faculty but differ in their outlook on the long-term viability of online learning for practical disciplines. These findings are particularly relevant to settings like Ghana, where practical courses in various fields are shifting online, suggesting that while faculty challenges are universal, the potential for blended models may be more feasible for certain disciplines like media and communication, requiring less reliance on hands-on practice.

2.2.5 Challenges Faced by Students and Faculty in the Transition to Online Learning

The sudden transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic presented numerous challenges for both students and faculty. A study by Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) sought to explore these difficulties by focusing on higher education institutions in developing countries. Using a qualitative approach that involved interviews with students and faculty, the study found

that limited access to reliable internet and technological tools significantly hindered online learning. Similarly, a study by Bao (2020) examined the transition to online learning in Chinese universities during the pandemic. This quantitative study used surveys to assess student and faculty experiences and found that while internet access was less of an issue, the challenge of adjusting to new pedagogical methods and technologies was prominent. While both studies highlight difficulties in the shift to online learning, Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) emphasize infrastructural challenges in developing countries, whereas Bao (2020) focuses on the pedagogical adjustments required in more developed regions. This suggests that while the infrastructural challenges in developing countries like Ghana are more immediate, regions with better technological infrastructure may face more issues with adapting teaching strategies and maintaining effective learning environments. Both studies are crucial, but their findings underscore the need for context-specific solutions—investing in digital infrastructure in developing countries, while in more developed regions, the focus could be on enhancing pedagogical training and adapting to online teaching methods.

The other major challenge during the transition was how students could be motivated and kept engaged with learning. Xie et al. (2020) conducted a study on the factors that impact student engagement in online learning environments in the United States. Using a mixed-methods approach-integrating both surveys and focus groups referred to interaction and isolation as major challenges. In contrast, the study by Johnson et al. (2021) aimed to investigate online learning engagement by students in Europe; the researchers were more interested in the aspects of media and communication programs. The survey-based methodology was implemented in this research. It reported that the most challenging students in terms of trying to encourage their engagement come from creative disciplines because such curricula lack hands-on learning activities and collaboration with peers. In both research studies, though, the effort of maintaining students engaged in activities is quite challenging; it points out different aspects,

with Xie et al. (2020) referring to social interaction and Johnson et al. (2021) pointing out the pragmatic and collaborative perspective of learning in creative fields. Their findings highlight how the practical, collaborative nature of creative curricula becomes especially difficult to replicate in an online environment, which may also be relevant for creative programs in Ghana. While both studies agree on the importance of engagement, they differ in their focus—Xie et al. stress social interaction, while Johnson et al. underscore the pragmatic and collaborative aspects, which are crucial for fields like media arts and design. These findings suggest that strategies to boost engagement must be tailored to the nature of the discipline, with more emphasis on social interaction in general education and on hands-on, collaborative activities in creative fields.

Faculty was also scrambling during this transition as the majority were under immense pressure to transition their pedagogical teaching approaches to online methods of teaching. Hodges et al. (2020) discussed the concept of "emergency remote teaching" and its impact on faculty during the pandemic. Their qualitative study, based on interviews with faculty members, found that the majority of teachers struggled since they did not receive prior training in online learning pedagogies, thereby stressing them and reducing their efficacy in teaching. A similar study by Trust and Whalen (2020) investigated how K-12 and higher education faculty in the United States adapted to online learning. In fact, by surveying 800 educators, they realized that though many faculty managed to adapt through self-learning and peer support, a significant number felt unprepared and overwhelmed. Although both studies make the growing difficulty for the faculty explicit, the work by Hodges et al. focuses more on the pedagogical challenge, while the work by Trust and Whalen puts in the foreground the emotional and psychological stress generated in this transition. This emotional burden is also a crucial consideration in Ghanaian higher education, where faculty may face similar stresses without adequate institutional support. While both studies underscore the difficulties faced by faculty, Hodges et al.

emphasize the lack of pedagogical preparedness, whereas Trust and Whalen broaden the scope by exploring the emotional impact of the transition. This suggests that addressing both the pedagogical and emotional needs of faculty is key to ensuring a smoother and more effective transition to online learning.

The issue of assessment in an online environment also posed significant challenges for both students and educators. A study by Gikandi et al. (2020) explored the effectiveness of online assessment methods in higher education institutions. Using a case study approach, they found that online assessments often failed to capture the complexity of student understanding, particularly in disciplines that require critical thinking and practical skills. Conversely, a study by DeVaney et al. (2020) focused on the challenges of conducting assessments in business education during the pandemic. Their mixed-methods study revealed that while traditional exams could be adapted to online formats, assessing practical skills such as teamwork and presentation abilities was more difficult. Both studies highlight the inadequacy of online assessment methods but focus on different aspects: Gikandi et al. (2020) emphasize the challenges in creative and practical fields, while DeVaney et al. (2020) focus on the difficulty of assessing soft skills in business education. This is particularly important for fields that demand collaborative work and interpersonal communication. Both studies underscore the inadequacy of online assessments in their respective contexts, but they differ in the types of skills they focus on—Gikandi et al. highlight practical and creative skills, while DeVaney et al. focus on the challenges of assessing soft skills. These insights point to the need for innovative assessment methods in online learning, tailored to the specific skills required by each discipline.

Finally, there has been well-documented psychological setbacks for both students and faculty in this transition to online learning. A study by Son et al. (2020), on the psychological impacts of online learning on students during the COVID-19 pandemic, adopted a survey-based

approach. The findings revealed that students reported higher levels of anxiety and stress due to feelings of isolation, academic pressures, and uncertainty about the future. Similarly, a study by Tasso et al. (2021) focuses on the psychological burden among faculty, particularly the balance of professional and personal duties. In this qualitative study, through interviews with university faculty, they found that many educators struggled with burnout, stress, and feelings of inadequacy in providing effective instruction in online settings. While both identify a significant psychological burden resulting from this transition to online learning, Son et al. (2010) it was an approach towards what the students' experiences would be, whereas Tasso et al., on the other hand, focus covered more the opposite: the approach considered the mental health challenges of the faculty. Together, these studies highlight the widespread psychological impacts of the rapid shift to online education, stressing the importance of addressing these challenges to ensure the well-being of both students and instructors.8d

While many studies have explored issues related to challenges and benefits within the context of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, few have looked at how online platforms could best serve practical courses with heavy emphases on creative work, such as media, arts, and communication. General difficulties faced by students and faculty concerning this transition to online learning are the subjects of many, but research by Adedoyin & Soykan (2020) and Hodges et al. (2020) has, up until now, covered underexplored ground: the specialized needs of creative programs reliant upon physical collaboration and specialized tools. This current study fills this gap by conducting an exploratory investigation of how online learning can be better adapted to serve practical, creative education at the University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UniMAC).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

2.3.1 E-Learning Theory

E-Learning theory has become a critical framework for understanding the application of digital technologies in education. As educational environments increasingly rely on technology, this theory explores how electronic tools and internet-based platforms can enhance learning experiences. It addresses how online learning, digital classrooms, and other technological innovations can be leveraged to support both traditional and non-traditional learning. While E-Learning theory emerged with the growth of digital technologies in education, its development has been influenced by many theorists and educational paradigms.

E-Learning, as a formal theory of learning, does not have a singular founding moment or a specific theorist who is credited with its development. Instead, it emerged gradually as educational technologies began to evolve, particularly in the late 20th century. With the rise of the internet and multimedia applications, educators and researchers recognized the potential for technology to reshape learning experiences. The term "E-Learning" itself began to gain traction in the 1990s as a way to describe learning experiences facilitated through digital tools such as learning management systems (LMS), online courses, and virtual classrooms (Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

While no single individual can be credited with originating E-Learning theory, key contributors such as Richard E. Mayer, Terry Anderson, and George Siemens have influenced its development. Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (2005) explored how multimedia learning can enhance understanding and retention, providing important insights into how E-Learning environments can be optimized. Terry Anderson's work on online collaborative learning has emphasized the importance of interaction and social presence in online environments (Anderson, 2008). George Siemens, known for his Connectivism theory,

which focuses on learning networks and digital connections, further developed ideas about how technology can foster knowledge building and sharing in decentralized online settings (Siemens, 2005).

E-Learning theory is based on several core assumptions that guide its principles and application. One of the most fundamental assumptions is that technology can significantly enhance the learning experience. Digital tools such as interactive content, videos, and simulations provide a dynamic learning environment that traditional classrooms often cannot replicate. E-Learning enables students to access a variety of multimedia content, making learning more engaging and accessible (Mayer, 2005).

Another key assumption of E-Learning is that it places the learner at the centre of the educational process. This learner-centered approach encourages self-directed learning, where learners can pace their education, access resources independently, and choose from various learning paths. This assumption aligns with constructivist principles, suggesting that learners learn best when they are active participants in constructing their own knowledge (Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

E-Learning also provides greater flexibility in terms of time and place. With online learning platforms, students can access content at their convenience, which is particularly beneficial for non-traditional learners, such as working professionals or those with time constraints. This asynchronous learning model allows learners to study at their own pace without being bound by scheduled class times (Anderson, 2008).

Another important assumption is that digital environments can foster collaborative learning experiences. E-Learning platforms support collaborative tools like discussion forums, group projects, and virtual classrooms, encouraging students to interact with each other and with

instructors. These interactions foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as learners engage in group discussions and peer-to-peer feedback (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001).

Finally, E-Learning systems provide extensive data on student engagement and performance, which can be used to personalize learning and inform instructional design. This emphasis on continuous improvement through real-time feedback and data analytics allows instructors to adjust the learning experience based on learner progress (Siemens, 2005).

Despite the numerous advantages of E-Learning, there are several criticisms associated with its practical implementation. One of the primary criticisms is the lack of face-to-face interaction. Critics argue that online learning can be isolating, as it removes the in-person interactions that are common in traditional classrooms. Social interaction, spontaneous discussions, and non-verbal communication all contribute to the learning experience, and the absence of these elements in E-Learning environments can lead to a feeling of disconnection or disengagement (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

Another criticism relates to technological barriers and accessibility issues. E-Learning assumes that all learners have access to reliable internet connections and the necessary technology, such as computers or mobile devices. However, many students in rural areas or disadvantaged communities may lack access to these resources, creating a digital divide that limits participation in online learning (Selwyn, 2011).

Additionally, student engagement and motivation can be challenging in E-Learning environments. Without the structure of in-person classes, some students may struggle with time management, leading to procrastination and incomplete coursework. The self-paced nature of online courses may also result in lower levels of motivation for some learners (Garrison et al., 2001). Furthermore, low levels of interaction with instructors and peers can hinder motivation and a sense of belonging in the learning community.

Moreover, critics argue that E-Learning places too much emphasis on technology, sometimes at the expense of quality pedagogy. While technology can facilitate learning, it is the underlying instructional design that determines the effectiveness of the learning experience. When E-Learning technologies are used without sufficient consideration of pedagogical principles, they may fail to foster meaningful learning outcomes (Laurillard, 2013).

Finally, assessment of learning outcomes in E-Learning environments presents challenges. Traditional forms of assessment, such as exams and essays, may not always be suitable for online learning contexts. Moreover, assessing collaborative skills, engagement, and deeper learning in digital spaces can be more complex than in face-to-face environments (Siemens, 2005).

2.3.2 The Significance of E-Learning Theory to the Study

The significance of E-Learning theory to the study of online learning in tertiary education, particularly in the context of post-COVID-19 education, cannot be overstated. E-Learning theory provides a critical lens through which we can understand the broader implications and challenges of adopting online learning platforms and digital tools in higher education institutions. As universities around the world, including the University of Media, Arts, and Communication, Institute of Journalism (UniMAC, IJ), transition from traditional classroom-based teaching to digital or hybrid learning environments, E-Learning theory offers a framework for analyzing both the opportunities and limitations associated with such transitions.

Firstly, E-Learning theory emphasizes the importance of learner-centered approaches, which resonate strongly with the current shift towards more personalized, flexible learning experiences. As the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the need for online education, it became

clear that traditional instructional methods could not effectively meet the diverse needs of learners in remote settings. E-Learning theory, by focusing on self-directed learning, allows students to engage with course materials at their own pace and according to their individual learning styles. This flexibility is crucial for institutions like UniMAC, IJ, where a diverse student body, including working professionals and international students, requires an education system that adapts to various schedules and learning preferences.

Furthermore, E-Learning theory underscores the role of technology-enhanced learning tools in facilitating deeper engagement and understanding. Online platforms, interactive media, and multimedia learning resources enable students to access learning materials that are often more engaging than traditional textbooks or lectures. This is particularly important for the study of the challenges and prospects of online learning in media and communication fields, where digital tools are already integral to the industry. By applying E-Learning theory, the study can explore how platforms and tools can support the development of essential skills such as digital literacy, creativity, and collaborative work, which are critical in the context of media and communication studies.

E-Learning theory also highlights the significance of collaborative learning environments. Online platforms facilitate interaction among students, instructors, and peers through discussion forums, group projects, and synchronous learning sessions. These collaborative opportunities are central to the educational experience at UniMAC, IJ, particularly for programs that require teamwork, discussion, and critical analysis, such as journalism, media studies, and communication. The theory's focus on social presence and interaction supports the notion that students can still build meaningful relationships and learning communities in online environments, even when physical interaction is not possible. Understanding this aspect of E-Learning theory is essential in addressing concerns about social isolation and engagement in remote learning settings.

Additionally, the data-driven approach inherent in E-Learning systems offers a valuable insight into the continuous improvement of learning experiences. With advanced learning management systems and analytics, instructors can monitor student performance in real time, offering personalized feedback and tailored interventions. For a university like UniMAC, IJ, where diverse learners might require varying levels of support, the ability to track student progress and adapt teaching strategies accordingly is essential for ensuring academic success. E-Learning theory's emphasis on the use of technology for assessment and personalized learning can help in the development of effective strategies for student engagement and retention in an online learning environment.

Finally, the critical reflections on the limitations of E-Learning theory are also significant for this study. The challenges posed by technological barriers, digital divides, and the potential lack of face-to-face interactions are important considerations in the transition to online learning at UniMAC, IJ. By understanding these limitations, the study can offer informed solutions and recommendations for overcoming such barriers, ensuring that online learning remains inclusive, equitable, and effective for all students, regardless of their technological resources or personal circumstances.

2.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter begins by exploring the increasing importance of online learning in higher education, particularly in the context of post-COVID-19 education. It introduces the shift towards digital and hybrid learning environments, highlighting the challenges and opportunities faced by institutions like the University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UniMAC, IJ). The chapter then delves into E-Learning theory, a framework that examines the role of technology in enhancing learning experiences. It outlines the key contributions of theorists such as Richard E. Mayer, Terry Anderson, and George Siemens, and emphasizes the learner-centered approach, flexibility, and collaborative learning aspects of E-Learning. The

chapter concludes by discussing the significance of this theory in addressing the needs and challenges of online learning, particularly in creative fields like media and communication studies.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology adopted to gather and analyze data for this study. The research design, selection of participants, collection of data, procedures used in analyzing data, and ethical issues are presented. This chapter intends to elaborate on the specific sections of the methods used to accomplish the research.

3.2 Research Approach and Design

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore the challenges and prospects of individuals involved in online learning at the University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UniMAC) in the post-COVID-19 era. Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. It is a process of inquiry that begins with a problem or issue, collects detailed data in a natural setting, and analyzes the data to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) describe qualitative research as a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world and make it visible in different ways, by focusing on meanings, experiences, and the practices of people in specific contexts. Qualitative research is the most suitable approach for studying this phenomenon because it provides the researcher with access to in-depth social contexts and researchers understand how individuals interpret and navigate their experiences (Lim, 2024). Creswell (2014) argues that qualitative research is specifically helpful for an in-depth understanding of the social process because of the meanings participants give to their experiences. This research design was well-suited for capturing the nuanced perspectives of students, faculty, and administrators on post-COVID-19 online learning, as their experiences

with the transition from face-to-face or blended learning to digital education differed. While quantitative research focuses on the quantification of phenomena and the establishment of patterns based on statistical analysis, qualitative research explores how people interpreted and made sense of their surroundings (Amaratunga et al., 2002). Individual narratives and perceptions provided a deeper understanding of the shifts occurring within educational settings at UniMAC.

The research was guided by the philosophical paradigm of interpretivism, which places great emphasis on understanding the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their experiences (Ryan, 2018). This paradigm assumes that reality is socially made and constructed through human relationships, implying that the experience of individuals exists within a particular context (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). This theoretical stance was particularly relevant to this study, as it aimed to capture how participants at UniMAC made sense of the transition to online learning in the aftermath of the pandemic. An interpretivist approach recognizes that any such experiences are not monolithic per se but intersubjective constructions based on personal, institutional, and cultural levels (Denzin, 2008).

The interpretivist paradigm is also in agreement with the study's objective, which sought an understanding not only of the technical facts of online learning but also the personal and institutional factors contributing to its success or failure (Ponelis, 2015). In this respect, this research adopted the latter framework to gather rich and detailed data representative of the complexity of online learning in a post-COVID-19 context. Whereas some participants might consider online learning a highly convenient and flexible alternative to traditional classroom settings, others may view digital inequality, lack of engagement, or institutional unpreparedness as major concerns (Tate & Warschauer, 2022). As Creswell and Poth (2017) mentioned, interpretivist research is particularly suited to studies that explore such varied and subjective experiences. It allows for an open and flexible investigation of participants' realities.

This study employed a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by students, faculty, and administrative staff during the transition to online learning at UniMAC. A case study design provides a comprehensive and contextualized examination of a particular instance or phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2014). Focusing on UniMAC as a case, the research offered insights into the experiences of individuals within this specific institution, contributing to broader discussions on the implementation of online learning in higher education in post-pandemic settings.

This justifies the use of in-depth face-to-face interviews as the primary method for data collection. Face-to-face interviews allowed for deep elicitation of participants' views while remaining open to new and emerging themes that may not have been envisaged at the beginning of the study. Focusing on interpretivism created many opportunities for the researcher to remain flexible and responsive to individual participant perspectives, yielding a complex dataset that revealed the challenges and possible prospects associated with the usage of online learning at UniMAC. The case study approach, combined with interpretivism, facilitated a nuanced understanding of the experiences and perceptions of those directly involved in the transition to online education.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

The population for this study comprised individuals directly involved in online learning at the University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UniMAC) during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This included students, faculty members, and administrative staff across various departments and roles. Given the diversity of experiences and challenges associated with the transition to online learning, participants were selected to reflect a cross-section of perspectives. For students, the focus was on those at different academic levels – diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate – across multiple faculties. Faculty members were chosen from diverse departments to capture variations in teaching approaches and subject-specific

challenges. Administrative staff were drawn from offices such as academic affairs and ICT services, as these departments played pivotal roles in implementing and supporting the online learning framework.

Purposive sampling was employed in this study to ensure the selection of individuals best positioned to provide rich, detailed insights into the research questions (Campbell et al., 2020). Patton (2002) defines purposive sampling or judgmental or selective sampling, as a technique where researchers choose participants based on specific characteristics aligning with the research objectives. Similarly, Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) describe this as a non-probability technique in which participants are deliberately chosen for their knowledge or experiences relevant to the study. This method enabled the researcher to target individuals with direct exposure to online education at UniMAC, ensuring data that addressed the complexity of the research focus (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2013).

Although all students at UniMAC participated in online learning during the pandemic, purposive sampling focused on those who had unique experiences, such as students facing digital inequality or those heavily engaged with online platforms for advanced coursework. Faculty members who extensively taught online courses or encountered significant challenges in adapting to digital teaching methods were prioritized. Administrative staff directly involved in the planning, support, and evaluation of online learning initiatives were also included. This approach ensured that the sample provided diverse and meaningful insights beyond general experiences (Wladis, Wladis, & Hachey, 2014).

For this study, a total of 15 participants were selected, comprising five students (two undergraduate and three postgraduate), five faculty members from various departments, and five administrative staff from roles such as academic affairs and ICT services. The expanded sample size included participants from various roles such as faculty, administrators, and

technical support staff ensuring a balanced representation of perspectives and providing comprehensive insights into the institution's adaptation to online learning. The participants were chosen based on their level of involvement and experience in areas relevant to online education or higher education practices during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis, 2011). The expanded and varied participant pool provided a well-rounded view of the challenges and prospects associated with online learning in a post-COVID-19 tertiary education environment.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided a robust framework from which to capture the complexity of participants' experiences related to online learning within the post-COVID-19 context (Almajali et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews come with predefined questions with the flexibility to explore the topics in further detail (Blandford, 2013). The interviews allow the researcher to capture rich qualitative data and leave room for the participants to express themselves, which is important in studies that aim to explain personal experiences of a delicate nature. Significantly, open-ended questions allow the interviewer to get more elaborative responses from the participants that they might not have obtained had they conducted more structured interviews.

All interviews were carried out face-to-face according to the preference and convenience of the participant. According to Creswell (2014), face-to-face interviews can create a personal touch between the researcher and participants, hence making them give more candid responses to the research questions. This mode of interview also offered several advantages such as convenience and reaching participants from different geographical locations (Hew & Cheung, 2020). The interviews were designed to ensure that the interviewees were comfortable and open with their views. Each interview was recorded and then later transcribed for detailed analysis.

These semi-structured interviews were used in the collection of data on challenges and prospects faced by participants in adapting to online learning at UniMAC. The nature of these data is qualitative, and thematic analysis was appropriate to explore patterns and themes that recur in participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach not only increases the depth of data richness but also constitutes the foundation for grounding findings in evidence-based on participants' actual experiences and perceptions, acting as useful insights for future practices in online education.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach that is decent, especially in the finding, analyzing, and reporting of patterns or themes from qualitative data. The data analysis for this study applied thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is an organized but iterative process made up of several distinct steps contributing to depth and richness in findings. First, the researcher started by familiarizing himself with the data; he did this by transcribing all interviews verbatim. This was a necessary step, in which the researcher was able to intimately familiarize himself with the content to gain a broad understanding of participants' experiences and views. The repeated review of transcripts by the researcher provided an opportunity to learn about the subtle variations in the narratives of the participants that would lead to a more informed analysis.

Following familiarization, initial coding of the data was done. The systematic process of identifying key phrases, concepts, and ideas linked directly to the research questions was done when coding the interview transcripts at this stage. All text was given some code to reduce the meaning of participants' responses, thus enabling the researcher to fragment the data into manageable units that are easy to analyze. Such a process is indicative in qualitative research, in that it outlines the significant patterns and ideas that might have been blind to other forms of observations. This gradually made sense in that the researcher was working through the data

to ascertain which codes resonated with core themes relevant to the objectives of the study and thus facilitated an in-depth comprehension of the participants' experiences with online learning.

The themes that the codes identified during the earlier phase were developed once the initial coding was done. It involved the identification of broader themes that encompass the narratives and patterns across the dataset. Themes were then identified that reflected the most common problems on challenges participants faced while adapting to online learning, opportunities developed as a result of this change, and COVID-19 impacts on educational experiences. Subsequently, all identified themes were reviewed for correctness in their representativeness of the data by recombining and splitting themes into categories of relevance to research questions. The themes were then named and defined by the researcher to provide a coherent framework that guided the presentation of findings and thus contributed to the overall conclusions of the study. This rigorous analytical process underlines the importance of thematic analysis in drawing meaningful insights from qualitative data.

3.6 Trustworthiness of the Study

The trustworthiness of qualitative research aims to ensure the credibility of the findings and the overall validity of the study (Anney, 2014). As a result, in this research, several strategies were very thoroughly considered to enhance trustworthiness, focusing on four key dimensions: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton,2004). Each of these dimensions is valuable in reinforcing both the integrity of the process of research and authenticity regarding data collection.

The researcher was aware of the principles of credibility in all instances of this study. To enhance this, the researcher had to spend a substantial amount of time with the respondents over semi-structured interviews so that the experiences shared by the respondents were brought out in a great deal of detail and recorded accordingly to be as accurate as possible. This helped

in not only gaining rapport but also generated more substantial data. Further, member checking was done in that participants were asked to review their transcripts for the accuracy of their responses. It allowed the participants to clarify or add to their statements, thereby enhancing the credibility of results since participants would have confirmed that what was recorded represented their experiences and views.

Another criterion of essential importance that was addressed in the study is the issue of transferability (Trompette et al., 2014). The researcher gave an elaborate description of the setting in which the research took place, indicating what uniquely distinguished both the participants and the environment in which the investigation was undertaken. This kind of contextual information helps other researchers evaluate the degree to which the findings apply to other settings or populations. Such thick description allows readers to draw comparisons or contrasts with their research settings and thus promotes a wider understanding of how the findings may have relevance beyond the direct study.

Dependability and confirmability were also ensured to enhance the general trustworthiness of the study (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016). An audit trail of transparency and clarity was maintained in recording the research procedure, right from the selection of the participants to data collection and data analysis. This is a source record that enables replicability by other researchers, a hallmark of dependable research. To address confirmability, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal during the study. The journal serves as a recording space of bias, assumptions, and personal reflection to build on self-awareness of the need for critical examination of the researcher's influence on data collection and interpretation. Recognition and reflection on personal biases helped the researcher to ensure that personal feelings did not influence the outcomes of the findings as much as the data from the voices of the participants.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues have been brought to the fore in the whole research process and have guided the study in protecting the rights and welfare of participants (Liamputtong, 2006). Ethical research practice promotes integrity in the study and engenders trust between the researcher and participants. Some of the ethical considerations have been strictly followed as a way of ensuring the study was responsibly and respectfully conducted.

The ethical foundation of the present research was informed consent (Lomelino, 2015). Every potential participant had been provided with an information sheet containing a description of the purpose of the study, procedures, and the rights of the participant before he or she agreed to take part in the research. Such transparency constitutes an important factor in helping participants become aware of what their involvement entails. Full time was given to reflect on participation and the opportunity to question the study was always available. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the research. It was fully ensured that their participation was voluntary, informed, and based on a clear understanding of the study's purpose and any potential effects associated with their involvement.

A second important ethical consideration in this research relates to confidentiality (Finch, 2001). Participants were guaranteed confidentiality regarding their identities, privacy, and contributions. To guarantee this, participants were given pseudonyms, and all data were stored in password-protected files to which only the researcher had access. Not only did this ensure that ethical practice was followed through, but it also allowed participants to speak candidly, knowing full well their identities would be protected. Data handling was performed under secure conditions to protect individual rights and make sure data protection regulations were upheld, further enhancing the ethical efficacy of the whole process.

Participation in this study was on a strictly volunteer basis in every respect. Informed consent is one of the most important concepts in research because participants' autonomy is respected and their self-determination not to engage in a certain research activity is also guaranteed.

3.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the research methodology used to explore the challenges and prospects of online learning in the context of post-COVID-19 education at the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC). Using a qualitative method, the study sought to give in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perspectives of this fundamental transition in educational practice. The data collection and analysis procedures were meticulously designed to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings while maintaining ethical integrity throughout the research process. The upcoming chapter will present the results and findings derived from the thematic analysis of the data, highlighting the key themes and insights that emerged from participants' narratives.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the findings from the analysis of the data collected from students, faculty, and administrative staff at the University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UniMAC), highlighting their experiences with online learning post-COVID-19. The key research objectives were to examine the challenges and benefits of online learning and explore the future prospects of online education. The analysis reveals several recurring themes that address these objectives and offer valuable insights into the current state and future directions of online learning.

The study sampled a total of 15 participants, comprising 6 students, 5 faculty members, and 4 administrative staff from UniMAC. The participants represented a diverse demographic background, with 8 males and 7 females. Age distribution ranged from 20 to 55 years, with students primarily in their early 20s, while faculty and administrative staff ranged from their mid-30s to mid-50s. Participants also varied in their experience with online education, with students having 1–3 years of experience, and faculty and administrative staff reporting 3–5 years of experience in digital pedagogies and management.

These demographic insights provide a foundational understanding of the participants' backgrounds and perspectives, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of the study's findings. The diversity in roles, gender, and experience ensures a balanced representation of viewpoints, offering a comprehensive overview of the online learning experience at UniMAC.

4.2 Challenges of Online Learning

4.2.1 Technological Access and Infrastructure

A significant challenge identified by participants was technological access and infrastructure. Many participants reported difficulties in maintaining stable internet connections and navigating online platforms effectively. Participant 1 (Student) expressed,

> *"There were a lot of times when my internet connection would drop during online lectures, and I would miss important information. This made it difficult to keep up with the course content."*

Likewise, Participant 6 (Faculty) highlighted,

> *"Some students struggled to access the platform or had issues with the technical side, like cameras not working or mic problems. These interruptions disrupted the flow of the class."*

Participant 4 (Student) added,

> "*Even when I had access to the internet, the platform itself was sometimes slow or malfunctioned, which made learning very frustrating."*

These findings align with the work of Rahiem (2021), who emphasized that technological barriers were a key challenge in the transition to online learning. The findings suggest that to meet the first research objective, universities must prioritize robust infrastructure, reliable internet access, and comprehensive technical support to ensure seamless learning experiences. Ensuring that both students and faculty are equipped with the necessary tools and knowledge to overcome technological challenges will significantly improve the online learning environment.

4.2.2 Engagement and Motivation

Another major challenge identified by participants was the lack of engagement and motivation in online learning environments. The absence of face-to-face interaction and the increasing potential for distractions were major factors in diminished student engagement. Participant 3 (Student) shared,

> "*It's hard to stay focused in an online class. You can easily get distracted by other things on your computer, and the lack of face-to-face interaction makes it less engaging."*

Participant 9 (Faculty) added,

> *"Online teaching lacks the spontaneity and interaction that a physical classroom provides. Students are often disengaged, and it's harder to gauge their understanding."*

Additionally, Participant 13 (Faculty) mentioned,

> *"Motivating students in an online environment is much more challenging. Without the immediate feedback and personal connection, students often seem disconnected from the learning process."*

Sood et al. (2021) also found that student engagement decreased in online learning environments, supporting the need for more interactive methods to sustain motivation and focus. This indicates that online learning strategies should prioritize fostering engagement through interactive features, peer collaboration, and regular check-ins to provide motivation for students to stay connected with the content and remain active participants in the learning process.

4.2.3 University Support and Resources

Participants expressed varying levels of satisfaction with the support provided by the university in adapting to online learning. Many noted that both students and faculty were ill-prepared for the sudden shift to online education. Participant 2 (Student) stated,

> *"We were just thrown into online learning without much preparation. Some of my professors didn't even know how to navigate the online platforms, and that made learning difficult."*

Participant 11 (Student) added,

> *"I struggled with the online resources because there wasn't enough guidance on how to access them, and there was no one to ask when things went wrong."*

These concerns are consistent with Rapanta et al. (2020), who found that institutions were largely unprepared for the rapid transition, leading to challenges in both teaching and learning.

As per the second research objective, this finding suggests the need for universities to provide comprehensive training and resources to faculty and students for navigating online learning platforms effectively, ensuring that both parties feel adequately supported in their roles and responsibilities.

4.2.4 Personal and Environmental Factors

Additionally, participants highlighted the impact of personal and environmental factors on online learning. For many students, socio-economic disparities in access to technology created significant barriers to learning. Participant 4 (Student) shared:

> "*Not all of us have access to high-quality internet or even a proper computer for online learning. Some of my classmates were really struggling with these issues, and it affected their performance."*

Similarly, Participant 10 (Administrative Staff) noted:

> "*We've seen a digital divide among students, where some come from areas with poor connectivity or lack the necessary devices. This is a major concern for equitable learning."*

These challenges reflect the findings of Tate and Warschauer (2022), who stressed the importance of addressing digital inequality to ensure equitable access to online education. This highlights the need for the university to consider these factors when designing online learning systems and ensure that all students have access to the necessary resources.

4.2.5 Interactivity and Student Participation

A common challenge mentioned by participants was the lack of interactivity and student participation in online classes. Participant 3 (Student) shared,

> "*It's hard to engage in online classes. Without the ability to raise my hand or ask immediate questions, I felt disconnected from the rest of the class*."

Participant 10 (Student) emphasized,

> *"I find myself zoning out because there's no immediate feedback from peers or the instructor, which is different from in-person classes where you can quickly ask a question or discuss a topic.*"

These findings are consistent with research by Sood et al. (2021), which found that the absence of spontaneous, face-to-face interactions significantly reduces student participation and engagement in online learning environments. This suggests that online learning platforms should incorporate more interactive features, such as real-time discussions or group activities, to foster a more dynamic and engaging learning environment.

4.2.6 Adaptation to Online Learning Platforms

The transition to online learning was not without its challenges, particularly regarding the adaptation to new platforms. Many participants, especially faculty, spoke of the steep learning curve associated with using unfamiliar online platforms. Participant 5 (Faculty) remarked,

> *"The initial phase was overwhelming, trying to learn how to operate the online platforms while continuing to teach effectively."*

Participant 8 (Student) added,

> *"At first, I struggled to figure out how to access course materials, submit assignments, and interact with my professors and classmates*."

These findings underscore the difficulties both students and faculty faced in adapting to new technologies and are supported by Rapanta et al. (2020), who pointed out that institutions were often unprepared to adequately support the transition to online learning. This highlights the need for comprehensive training and clear guidance to facilitate the smooth adoption of online learning platforms.

4.2.7 Faculty and Instructional Challenges

Faculty participants reported several challenges in adapting their teaching methods to online formats. Participant 8 (Faculty) noted,

> *"The lack of face-to-face interaction made it difficult to gauge student comprehension, and I had to adjust my teaching strategies*."

Participant 7 (Faculty) noted,

> "*There were significant hurdles in designing assessments that were fair and effective in an online setting, as it is hard to monitor students' progress as closely as in person."*

These challenges underscore the need for ongoing professional development for faculty to enhance their online teaching skills, as identified by Rapanta et al. (2020). Overall, the faculty participants' experiences highlight the importance of providing comprehensive support and training to help educators transition successfully to online learning environments and ensure the quality of instruction.

4.3 The Long-Term Prospects of Integrating Online Learning into UniMAC's Curriculum.

4.3.1 Flexibility and Convenience of Online Learning

One of the most widely mentioned benefits of online learning was the flexibility it provided. Many students appreciated the ability to study at their own pace and from any location, allowing them to balance academic responsibilities with work and personal commitments. Participant 5 (Student) explained,

> *"Online learning gives me the freedom to study whenever I want. I don't have to worry about being in class at a certain time. It allows me to balance my studies with work and other responsibilities."*

Likewise, Participant 10 (Faculty) stated,

> *"Having the ability to teach at any time, without being restricted to a fixed schedule, has made my work-life balance so much easier. It makes teaching less stressful."*

This flexibility is supported by Kintu et al. (2017), who found that online learning provides enhanced flexibility, benefiting both students and faculty in terms of time management and work-life balance. This benefit contributes positively to the third research objective by

demonstrating how online learning can be a more adaptable and convenient approach to education, catering to diverse schedules and personal needs while promoting a more inclusive learning environment.

4.3.2 Future Prospects of Online Learning

The study also found that online learning could become an integral part of the university's curriculum. Participant 6 (Faculty) shared,

> "*Although the transition was difficult, I think online learning can offer more flexible options in the future. It's a great supplement to traditional teaching."*

Participant 9 (Student) concurred,

> *"Online learning gives us the opportunity to learn at our own pace, and combining it with in-person sessions could create a more dynamic and flexible learning environment."*

These insights align with the growing trend toward blended learning models in educational institutions, where online and face-to-face teaching are integrated to enhance flexibility and accessibility, as highlighted by Castro, (2019). The potential for a blended model, combining the strengths of both formats, could significantly shape the future of higher education.

4.3.3 Improvement and Policy Suggestions

Several participants offered suggestions for improving the online learning experience at UniMAC. Participant 3 (Student) recommended,

> "*There should be more technical support, especially for those who struggle with technology. We need more resources to help us navigate the platforms."*

Participant 9 (Faculty) suggested,

> *"Providing more training and support for faculty would improve the quality of online teaching."*

Participant 12 (Faculty) also suggested,

> *"Regular feedback sessions with students would help instructors understand the challenges they face and improve the learning experience."*

These suggestions align with findings from Nawaz and Khan, (2012) who advocated for improved institutional support in the areas of training, resources, and technological infrastructure.

4.4 Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 of this study presents the findings from the interviews conducted with students, faculty, and administrative staff at UniMAC regarding their experiences with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter identifies several key challenges, including technological access and infrastructure issues, lack of engagement and motivation, and insufficient university support and resources. It also highlights the benefits of online learning, particularly in terms of flexibility and convenience, as well as the potential for a blended learning model in the future. The findings indicate that while online learning has the potential to enhance educational experiences, significant improvements are needed in areas such as technological infrastructure, faculty training, and student support to maximize its effectiveness.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the study's key findings, presents the conclusion drawn from the research, and offers recommendations for improving online learning at UniMAC. The chapter also outlines potential areas for future research.

5.1 Summary of the Study

The study aimed to explore the challenges and benefits that both students and faculty have gone through in this switch to online learning at UniMAC due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and endeavors to take a closer look into its long-term future within the curriculum of the university. Information was gathered via interviews with students, faculty members, and administrative staff. The data were analyzed to uncover key themes around the online learning experience.

The research findings underlined some of the serious problems that students and faculty members faced in adapting to the new learning mode. Most of these were related to technological access and infrastructure: unstable internet access, inability to access online platforms, and lack of technical support were commonly reported among most participants. These had a very negative impact on proper learning and disturbed the teaching and studying experience. The focus also fell on critical issues regarding engagement and motivation because without face-to-face interactions, students were less participating and had problems keeping focus. Instructors also could not tell if the students knew what was going on without in-person engagement, or being able to meet each student's individual needs. Unsatisfactory university support and resources were another issue. As can be observed, many respondents raised the view that students and faculty were unprepared for rapid online transitions, lacking even the most basic training or resources essential to their success in the online setting. As would be

expected, these unmet preparation and support needs created various challenges for students and faculties, impeding the effective quality and outcomes of their engagement in learning online.

Setting aside the transition challenges, there have been a number of important benefits that have arisen with online learning, especially with flexibility and convenience. For instance, most of the students preferred a self-directed learning approach because online learning gave them an opportunity to take charge of their time and study at any place. This flexibility allowed students to effectively balance their academic responsibilities with personal and work commitments, offering a sense of control over their learning experience. Faculty members also recognized the potential advantages of online learning, noting that it could serve as a valuable supplement to traditional teaching methods. This would enable instructors to record lectures and share resources online, thus offering more accessible and flexible learning opportunities to meet the diverse needs of students. Also, faculty appreciated the possibility to include more varied teaching methods that could enhance the overall educational experience for students by providing greater accessibility and promoting better engagement. All these together have made many participants take online learning to be a useful, complementary tool in education, though it requires further adaptation and development.

Participants were also optimistic about the long-term prospects of online learning, in particular the possibility of integrating a blended learning model that combines flexibility in online education with interactive benefits of in-person instruction. Many felt such a hybrid approach could offer the best of both worlds: students could benefit from the flexibility of online learning but still maintain the personal interaction and engagement that face-to-face education provides. They hypothesized, however, that for online learning to prove truly effective in the future, a number of important enhancements would have to be made. This includes heavy investment in technological infrastructure to ensure reliable access to online platforms, comprehensive

training of faculty to improve their effectiveness as teachers in digital environments, and more substantial support for students in dealing with challenges related to learning online. In these, participants realized, provide the grounds of a far more seamless, engaging, and accessible online learning environment for students and faculty in the future.

5.2 Conclusion

The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed both significant challenges and valuable opportunities for students and faculty at UniMAC. Key challenges included technological barriers such as unstable internet connections, difficulties navigating platforms, and a lack of preparation for both students and faculty. Engagement and motivation also emerged as concerns, as students struggled to remain focused in a virtual environment.

Despite these hurdles, online learning offered flexibility, allowing students to study at their own pace and balance academic responsibilities with other commitments. Faculty members also recognized the potential for more flexible teaching methods, which enhanced accessibility and supplemented traditional instruction.

The findings underscore the importance of addressing the challenges identified—particularly by improving technological infrastructure, providing training for both students and faculty, and fostering greater engagement through interactive learning strategies. With proper support, online learning can significantly enhance educational experiences by offering more flexible options and improving accessibility for students with various personal and academic needs. Moving forward, universities must focus on refining both technological and pedagogical elements of online education to maximize its benefits.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the online learning experience at UniMAC:

1. **Improve Technological Infrastructure and Access**: The university should invest in enhancing its technological infrastructure to ensure reliable internet connectivity and provide necessary devices for both students and faculty. Additionally, financial assistance or technology subsidies could be offered to students who lack access to required devices or stable internet. This would help create a more equitable learning environment.
2. **Enhance Faculty Training and Support**: The university should offer ongoing professional development programs for faculty, focusing on the effective use of online teaching tools, strategies for fostering student engagement, and best practices for delivering interactive content. This training will enable instructors to adapt effectively to online teaching and improve their delivery of virtual courses.
3. **Increase Student Support Services**: The university should establish comprehensive support systems for students, including technical assistance and resources for navigating online learning platforms. Providing a helpdesk and clear guides on using online platforms, as well as offering pre-semester training sessions, will ensure that students are well-prepared for their online learning experiences.
4. **Foster Greater Engagement and Interaction**: Faculty should be encouraged to adopt interactive teaching methods that promote active participation. Incorporating tools such as discussion forums, virtual group work, live Q&A sessions, and peer collaboration will help replicate the interactivity and engagement of in-person classes, ensuring that students remain involved and motivated.

5. **Integrate Blended Learning Models**: The university should explore implementing a blended learning model that combines the flexibility of online learning with the engagement of in-person classes. This approach will allow students to benefit from flexible study schedules while maintaining opportunities for direct interaction and hands-on learning experiences.
6. **Conduct Regular Evaluations of Online Learning**: The university should regularly assess the effectiveness of its online learning programs by gathering feedback from students and faculty through surveys and focus groups. This will help identify areas for improvement and allow the university to make data-driven decisions to enhance the online learning experience and ensure continuous growth in its online education offerings.

5.4 Areas for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges and benefits of online learning at UniMAC, there are several areas that warrant further exploration. Future research could focus on the long-term impacts of online learning on student performance and academic success, as well as the effectiveness of blended learning models in different disciplines. Additionally, research could explore the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, particularly those from lower-income or rural areas, to better understand the barriers they face in accessing online education.

Moreover, further studies could examine the role of social interaction and community-building in online learning environments. As engagement and motivation were identified as key challenges in this study, investigating how to foster a sense of community and connection among online learners could be an important area for future research.

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Appendices

INTERVIEW GUIDE

POST COVID-19AND TERTIARY EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF ONLINE LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MEDIA, ARTS AND COMMUNICATION

The key challenges faced by students and faculty in the transition to online learning at UniMAC during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. What were the biggest challenges you faced when transitioning to online learning during the pandemic?
2. How did issues like access to technology (e.g., internet, devices) affect your ability to participate in online learning?
3. How did the shift to online learning impact your engagement or motivation to learn?
4. Were there any specific personal or environmental factors that made online learning more difficult for you?
5. Do you feel that the support provided by the university (e.g., academic or technical help) was sufficient during this transition?

Objective 2: The long-term prospects of integrating online learning into UniMAC's curriculum.

1. Do you believe that online learning should continue to be a part of UniMAC's curriculum after the pandemic? Why or why not?
2. In what ways do you think online learning could complement traditional in-person classes in the future?

3. What do you see as the biggest benefits of incorporating online learning into the long-term curriculum?
4. What challenges do you think UniMAC might face in continuing online learning in the future, and how can these be addressed?
5. What improvements or changes would you suggest to the university to make online learning more effective for students and faculty moving forward?

CODES AND THEMES

CODES	THEMES
Difficulty with unreliable internet connections causing reluctance Limited access to reliable technology was a major obstacle to participation Inconsistent internet connectivity, especially in rural areas Need for a robust internet connection for students Sharing devices with family members during online classes	Technological Access and Infrastructure
Minimal interactivity reduced engagement and motivation Home environment led to frequent distractions Inability to replicate a focused classroom environment Lack of interactive elements in online learning negatively impacted enthusiasm Potential decline in student attendance for online classes	Engagement and Motivation
University efforts were appreciated but insufficient Support for integrating online learning if internet access and interactivity improve Teachers and students required tailored support for technical challenges Limited academic and technical support, particularly during urgent needs Lack of timely assistance from IT support	University Support and Resources
The home environment wasn't conducive for studying Noise and distractions from family members	Personal and Environmental Factors

Emotional stress due to the pandemic negatively impacted concentration Shared living spaces interfered with study schedules The need to balance household responsibilities with learning	
Minimal interactivity affected student engagement Difficulty participating in live discussions due to technical issues Lack of face-to-face interaction with peers and faculty The shift to online learning made lessons less dynamic Limited opportunities for students to ask questions directly	Interactivity and Student Participation
Difficulty with adjusting to new digital platforms and tools Lack of familiarity with certain online platforms Students had to adapt without proper technical skills Lack of orientation or workshops for using learning tools Challenges with unfamiliar online tools and platforms	Adaptation to Online Learning Platforms
Flexibility to access lectures and materials at their own pace Students appreciated the ability to study from home Ability to revisit recorded lectures helped in understanding complex topics Online learning allowed for more flexible study schedules Convenience of not needing to commute to campus	Flexibility and Convenience of Online Learning

Need for better faculty training in online teaching methods Teachers had difficulty adapting to online delivery of lessons Limited faculty preparedness for online teaching Faculty also faced technical difficulties during classes Lack of engaging online content created by faculty	Faculty and Instructional Challenges
The need for online learning to complement traditional in-person classes Online learning could help lecturers finish course outlines on time Integration of online learning can offer flexibility for students with diverse schedules Hybrid models could provide the best of both online and in-person learning Online learning is crucial in preparing students for digital workplaces	Future Prospects of Online Learning
Create more interactive online sessions to keep students engaged Improve the user-friendliness of online learning platforms Develop policies addressing the needs of marginalized groups Provide continuous feedback and evaluation to improve the online learning experience Subsidize internet access or provide computers for students with limited access	Improvement and Policy Suggestions