



## ORİJİNAL MAKALE / ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Balıkesir Sağlık Bilimleri Dergisi / BAUN Sağlık Bil Derg  
Balıkesir Health Sciences Journal / BAUN Health Sci J  
ISSN: 2146-9601- e ISSN: 2147-2238  
Doi: <https://doi.org/10.53424/balikesirsbd.1214728>



### Nursing Students` Experiences with Clinical Placement During the Covid-19 Pandemic After the Online Education

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*Geliş Tarihi / Received: 05.12.2022, Kabul Tarihi / Accepted: 19.05.2023*

#### ABSTACT

**Objective:** It examine the clinical placement experiences of nursing students following their online education during the Covid-19 pandemic. **Material and Methods:** A qualitative method with a phenomenological approach was used. The sample of the study consisted of a total of 111 nursing students from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades who received online education and clinical practice during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thematic analysis with the NVivo 20 program was used in the analysis of the data. **Results:** There themes emerged from the data: 1) The impact of Covid-19 on nursing students; 2) Perceived online education during Covid-19; 3) Clinical experiences during Covid-19. **Conclusion:** Nursing students described Covid-19 as life-threatening, causing them to experience fear and anxiety. Online nursing education influences the pros and cons of clinical placement in the learning process.

**Keywords:** Nursing Students, Covid-19, Experiences.

### Hemşirelik Öğrencilerinin Online Eğitimden Sonra Covid-19 Pandemisi Sırasında Klinik Uygulama Deneyimleri

#### ÖZ

**Amaç:** Hemşirelik öğrencilerinin Covid-19 pandemisi sırasında online eğitimlerini takiben klinik uygulama deneyimlerini incelemektir.

**Gereç ve Yöntem:** Fenomenolojik yaklaşımlı nitel bir yöntem kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın örneklemini, Covid-19 pandemisi sırasında online eğitim alan ve klinik uygulamaya çıkan 2., 3. ve 4. sınıflardan toplam 111 hemşirelik öğrencisi oluşturmuştur. Verilerin analizinde NVivo 20 programı ile tematik analiz kullanılmıştır.

**Bulgular:** Verilerden ortaya çıkan temalar şunlardır: 1) Covid-19 'un hemşirelik öğrencileri üzerindeki etkisi; 2) Covid-19 sırasında algılanan online eğitim; 3) Covid-19 sırasındaki klinik deneyimler.

**Sonuç:** Hemşirelik öğrencileri, Covid-19 'u hayatlarını tehdit eden, korku ve endişe yaşamalarına neden olarak tanımladılar. Online hemşirelik eğitimi, öğrenme sürecinde klinik yerleştirmenin artılarını ve eksilerini etkiler.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hemşirelik Öğrencileri, Covid-19, Deneyimler.

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**Bu makaleye atıf yapmak için / Cite this article:** Özdemir, A., Ünal, E., & Sanlan, B. (2023). Nursing students` experiences with clinical placement during the COVID-19 pandemic after the online education. *BAUN Health Sci J*, 12(3),548-553. <https://doi.org/10.53424/balikesirsbd.1214728>.



BAUN Health Sci J, OPEN ACCESS <https://dergipark.org.tr/pub/balikesirsbd>

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## INTRODUCTION

The new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has a high morbidity and mortality incidence and is the most significant viral pandemic in the last century (Majrashi et al., 2021). In Turkey, universities provided online education as of March 2020 (HEI, 2020). Additionally, nursing students' clinical placement experiences were conducted online until September 2021 in Turkey.

Online nursing education during COVID-19 led to challenges for nursing students, lecturers, and institutions (Lewandowski et al., 2021). Due to insufficient online learning-based teaching approach competencies, a lack of student interaction, and online courses, instructors experienced difficulties (Stanistreet et al., 2020). On the other hand, students experienced challenges because of their incapacity to develop their clinical abilities, a lack of motivation, and interruptions imposed by online learning (Dost et al., 2020). Additionally, online education was stated as a significant source of stress (Subedi et al., 2020), inability to engage (Lovric et al., 2020), and stress related to difficulties in developing clinical skills (Michel et al., 2021), and reported anxiety (Michel et al., 2021; Savitsky et al., 2020).

The move to online education through clinical training of nursing students resulted in challenges in learning skills in clinical practices. Although attempts to continue clinical placement experiences online clinical practices, online education implementations cannot replace clinical placement experiences (Head et al., 2022). Therefore, clinical placement experiences are 50% of the nursing profession and allow for the theory to be applied to the practice and development of skills (Killam & Heerschap, 2013).

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to investigate nursing students' experiences after their first clinical placement after online education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. This research offers data to build knowledge of how these students experienced the first clinical placements following their online education during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Design

A practical method for comprehending individual experiences is phenomenological research. A phenomenology is an approach that analyses everything that awareness perceives and investigates how people view the experiences they encounter in groups that have in-depth experience with a phenomenon (Gill, 2020). Therefore, this study examined nursing students' experiences who had online clinical placement during Covid-19 and described their understanding of Covid-19.

### Setting and participants

The study was carried out at a university in Turkey. The sample was a convenience sample with participants recruited online using e-mail in a university in Turkey. The following inclusion criteria were used: participants should be nursing students` 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years of

university students who took online education during the pandemic. A total of 111 eligible participants completed the survey and were identified as female (n= 92) and male (n=19). Furthermore, the exclusion criteria were nursing students' 1st year of university.

### Data collection procedures

Qualitative data were collected using demographic features and open-ended questions within a qualitative survey, which used metaphors, answered the survey questions, and explained why it was used metaphors. Participants responded to the questions in their own words, using the metaphors in any detail they considered appropriate. In contrast to other types of qualitative data, qualitative surveys allow data collection from a diverse and varied sample while ensuring a high level of anonymity. Therefore, they are an excellent source for understanding challenging and sensitive subjects, such as evaluating nursing students' experiences related to clinical placement after taking 1.5 years of online education during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used for an in-depth understanding of the experiences of nursing students who have made their first clinical placement following their online training during the Covid-19 pandemic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first codes were created by reading the transcripts. The codes were gathered under the themes, clearly defined themes, striking quotations were selected, and reported data analysis. NVivo 20 was used for coding.

### Trustworthiness

Validity and reliability are improved in qualitative research when comprehensive data collection and analysis are produced (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yıldırım & Simsek, 2016). The reliability in terms of consistency was tested in the study using three experts in qualitative research. By coding the metaphors and the questions designed to be perceived metaphorically, the three researchers who carried out the research separately developed categories. By debating the metaphors' codes and categories, 193 codes, three categories, three themes, and ten sub-themes were developed in line with the participants' experiences of clinical placements. Then, three researchers had discussions on the main themes and sub-themes. After discussion meetings, themes and subthemes were created by reaching a common decision through repeated qualitative surveys.

### Ethical consideration

The study was approved by the Medical Research Ethics Committee of Bursa Uludağ University, Faculty of Health Sciences in Bursa, Turkey (29.09.2021, Reference Number: 2021-08). Written and verbal consent was obtained from the researchers. Researchers stated to the participants that qualitative surveys were recorded, the data was used for research purposes only, and their identities were kept confidential.

## RESULTS

A total of 111 eligible nursing students from the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years of the university participated in the qualitative survey (Table 1). Therefore, they had clinical placement before the Covid-19 pandemic. One hundred ninety-three codes were extracted from the data obtained through the face-to-face qualitative surveys. Three main themes and ten sub-themes emerged from those codes. The three themes were: the impact of Covid-19 on nursing students', perceived online education during Covid-19 and clinical experiences during Covid-19 .

### **Theme 1: The impact of Covid-19 on nursing students** *Understanding of Covid-19*

Nursing students described Covid-19 as a contagious epidemic that unexpectedly affects people's lives and the world. Moreover, they defined Covid-19 as a teacher, leading them to question their life purposes and providing new gains. In addition, the uncertainty of the progress of Covid-19 has not been explored, and some nursing students highlighted this epidemic led to a life threat to people's lives. Due to the adverse effects of this unpredictable process on human life, people have begun to experience feelings of hopelessness.

"Unexpected box. We do not know what will happen, how it will impact you, whether your immune system will handle it (P32)."

#### *Feeling fear, anxiety, and hopelessness*

The disease process was frightening because Covid-19 led to a high number of deaths. Nursing students have experienced fear and anxiety due to the uncertainty of the disease process. Furthermore, it was underlined that the high risk of infection with Covid-19 led to increased anxiety and hopelessness caused by the loss of loved ones.

"Cloudy weather. It is uncertain when it will occur. Even though you take the required precautions, something does not go as expected. You may eventually experience surprise, fear, sadness, or happiness (P29)."

#### *Prevention of Covid-19 and impact on lifestyle*

Protective measures are crucial because of the high level of infectiousness. Some nursing students highlighted that wearing protective clothing and reducing social interaction on their social networks were the ways to prevent the disease. Furthermore, the disease would be more controlled at that level the more importance was given to preventive efforts. Within the scope of disease protection, individuals learn and adopt new behaviors in their social interactions. Moreover, social networks were limited to family networks instead of peer or neighborhood networks.

"We spent a lot of time isolated at home, with minimal social interactions and family and neighborhood relationships (P44)."

### **Themes 2: Perceived online education during Covid-19**

This main theme included sub-themes of the aspect of the online education that nursing students received for 1.5 years during the Covid-19 pandemic. The three sub-themes were followed: transition to online education and challenges faced, the importance of the clinical internship, and psychological impact.

#### *Transition to online education and challenges faced*

Nursing students highlighted a new online social environment brought by experiencing the process in which they received online nursing education. Some nursing students emphasized the strengths and weaknesses of adopting this new social environment and the uncertainty of the online education process.

"In both my social and academic lives, I experienced restrictions and boredom. Regardless of how much free time we appear to have, and I can honestly state that I have never been motivated by a need (P91)."

#### *The importance of a clinical placement*

The online education process led to challenges in connecting theoretical nursing education and clinical placement. Even though clinical internships have been completed online, that led to a lack of clinical placement experiences. Nursing students stated that clinical placement was essential in their nursing education process.

"Clinical internship was ineffective as they were made with online education. Our nursing skills in clinics have not improved due to lack of experiences in clinics (P69)."

### **Theme-3: Clinical experiences during Covid-19**

#### *Difficulties of experiencing a clinical internship*

The challenges encountered in the clinical setting safety precautions, including wearing masks and distance guidelines following those precautions, was challenging for nursing students, who reported trouble adapting. Nursing students explained their difficulties to their incapacity to transition to clinical placement and their lack of paying awareness of these precautions while experiencing and delivering patient care. At the same time, it ensures accurate prevention of disease spread. After Covid-19 , they revealed to experience in clinical placement for the first time and discovered their theoretical understanding in a clinical placement, which they described as their lack of previous experience.

"We were away from the hospitals for a long time due to the pandemic. I had difficulty getting used to the patients and procedures when we began training in the hospital. The nurses suggested we begin by observing (P13).

Nursing students who resumed clinic placement after the clinical practice was discontinued in clinics but applied online highlighted the lack of clinical experiences after the online clinical placement was applied, the lack of mentors to help them supervise the clinic placement was highlighted by students because of this feeling. Nursing students that had their clinic placements moved emphasized that they were concerned about how Covid-19 would affect their clinical practice.

**Table 1. The participants' demographic characteristics (n=111).**

Variables	n	%
<b>Grade</b>		
2	2	1.8
3	39	35.1
<b>4</b>	70	63.1
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	92	82.9
Male	19	17.1
<b>Status of Covid-19</b>		
Yes	19	17.1
No	92	82.9
<b>Covid-19 -related loss of a loved one</b>		
Yes	16	14.4
No	95	85.6
<b>Total</b>	111	100

Experience with clinical placements, I always did as they said (P80)."

#### **Emotional experiences**

Fear, anxiety, helplessness, exhilaration, and uncertainty were among the emotions nursing students reported as they entered clinical practice for the first time after completing their online education. The limitations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic process negatively impacted the students' and their families' adjustment to the clinical placement, which was established with precaution measures to prevent the spread of the disease before being returned to clinical placement. They caused them to have difficulty adapting and experience fear and anxiety.

"Our immunisation process was not completed when we started to work with patients as part of the Covid-19 process. I was terrified and helpless (P14)."

"I was afraid of spreading the infection to my family because I live with them (P31)."

Some nursing students stated the excitement of returning to clinical placement because of applying theoretical knowledge to clinical practice. Additionally, the excitement of clinical practice motivated them to work hard and effectively in clinical placement. It was a remarkable and valued experience and encouraged them to play a vital part in patient care. The students' positive emotion was enthusiasm, which they connected to their first-time clinical experiences after Covid-19 and the placement of their academic knowledge into the clinical practices.

"I felt surprised and afraid because there were things that I had never done in practice and even the fundamentals that I had only partially applied (P78).

The resuming clinical internship eliminates the inadequacies of clinical practice resulting in participation in clinical placement, which led to relief. Despite, the Covid-19 uncertainty in the clinical practice process and some nursing students' anxiety over the possibility of committing mistakes in clinical practice.

"Even though I try my best, I feel that I still have a lot to learn and that I could be doing better (P107)."

"...the worry that I could make a mistake at any time makes me anxious (P65)."

#### **Feeling unsafe in clinical placement**

The clinical setting was described as unsafe and dangerous. Nursing students stressed that the hospital setting carries a significant risk for the transmission of Covid-19 and that their concern of contamination due to this high risk is unsafe. Despite taking precautions, they underlined that it is uncertain how or when they will discover Covid-19. They stressed how they felt vulnerable to asking for assistance in the clinical setting, which they described as a dangerous environment. Additionally, the students' fear of clinical practice has increased because they are accountable for contamination.

"According to the contracts we signed, no one was responsible if we contracted Covid-19 at the clinics we visited during the Covid-19 period, but the requirement that we sign them caused me to perceive myself as a victim (P101)."

#### **The awareness of the importance of clinical placement**

The learning process was aided by the evolution of theoretical education and clinical practice. Integrating theoretical instruction with clinical practice improves accuracy for practical limitations in students pursuing clinical practice. In addition, clinical experience has influenced nursing students' involvement in patient care. "As someone who has only been supplied with knowledge, I have no idea how to apply it. However, I started to fade when I failed to put this knowledge into practice and found it difficult to make the clinical placement (P33)."

#### **DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to examine nursing students' experiences with clinical placement during the Covid-19 pandemic after the online clinical placement and describe their understanding of Covid-19 .

This study's findings state that nursing students experienced anxiety and fear for their families and neighbors. The fear of having family members and relatives having Covid-19 positive has caused anxiety among nursing students (Lovrić et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study highlighted the fatality of Covid-19, and the lack of knowledge about the course of the disease impacted fear and anxiety. Similar findings were found in the study by Winn et al. (2021), which sought to examine the viewpoints of medical faculty residents regarding their pandemic experiences (Winn et al., 2021). These students had a decreased desire to practice medicine for patients at home and those in health. A study conducted in Norway in 2021 examined the association between fear of Covid-19 and at risk for Covid-19 transmission and being less confident in the precautions implemented. Students who did not engage in clinical placement during the pandemic feared Covid-19 (Beisland et al., 2021). During clinical practice, it was found that nursing students in their last year felt slightly anxious and moderately fearful (Yazıcı & Okten, 2022). These emotions may have been caused by the possibly fatal Covid-19, the unknown nature, and the lack of available treatments and vaccines.

The lack of clinical placement because of the pandemic, it was emphasised, made nursing students feel inadequate, which harmed their learning processes and led to failure. Students have encountered the unpredictability of how this approach may impact their academic careers (Huang et al., 2020; Lovric et al., 2020). In research by Duprez et al. (2021) examining nursing students' desire to continue in or leave their internship during the pandemic, it was found that 61.7% of the students were prepared for clinical placement and that 30.7% were qualified to deliver the care for coronavirus patients (Duprez et al., 2021). This finding suggests that it is crucial to assess students' readiness. Even though Covid-19 led to a halt in clinical placement, theoretical education and clinical placement have to take place concurrently. Our findings were similar to a study examining how students engaged with theoretical education and clinical placement, indicating the compatibility of clinic and theory (Sancar et al., 2021).

Peer support and clinical and academic staff assistance are essential components of clinical compliance (Lovric et al., 2020). Due to their experience in a dangerous and potentially infectious pandemic, their inexperience with online education, the fact that they were not acknowledged as a part of the team, and the fact that they cannot access nurses for assistance, students may have feelings of insecurity. On the other hand, the clinic is an essential component of the profession, and nursing students noted this when they were asked about their fears of working in a clinical environment (Lovric et al., 2020). However, they highlighted their willingness to work in the clinic and care for patients, regardless of their fears (Casafont et al., 2021). The clinical environment, students' professional knowledge, psychomotor, professional attitude and responsibility, interpersonal and communication skills, as well as self-confidence and

autonomy in the clinical setting, are all factors that should be considered (Lovric et al., 2015).

Nursing students noted that it was stressful and resulted in a lack of motivation. Similarly, medicine interns pointed out that Covid-19 was causing them to feel overwhelmed, fearful, anxious, and stressed and that these feelings were exacerbating an already demanding internship with high burnout levels (Singaram et al., 2022). Nursing students positively evaluated the ability to attend the modules from any location and online education (Park & Seo, 2022). In the beginning, nursing students claimed that online education provided comfort. They then felt restricted by the new social network and encountered difficulties due to moving on with their lives in this environment. In contrast to our findings, a systematic review examining how health profession students' perceptions and engagement of online learning during Covid-19 stated that when compared to classroom learning, students' motivation for attending exclusive events was determined to be at least as high (Naciri et al., 2021).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has identified that students have experienced the Covid-19 process's uncertainty, infection risk, fear of losing loved ones, anxiety, and hopelessness. Online education led to a transition process both in the educational and social environments of nursing students, and they were limited in this transition process. The significance of clinical placement experiences has been highlighted because of the negative impacts of inexperienced clinical practice on nursing students' learning processes and the precautions taken.

## Acknowledgement

The authors would like to extend their sincere thanks to anyone who contributed to this study.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## Author Contributions

**Plan, design:** AÖ, EU, BS; **Material, methods and data collection:** AÖ, EU, BS; **Data analysis and comments:** AÖ, EU, BS; **Writing and corrections:** AÖ, EU, BS.

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