# An Intercultural Comparative Study: Romanian and Japanese Students' Perceptions Of Online Education And Learning Practice During The Covid-19 Pandemic[1]

## Kültürlerarası Karşılaştırmalı Bir Çalışma: Roman ve Japon Öğrencilerin COVID-19 Salgını Döneminde Çevrimiçi Öğretim ve Öğrenme Pratiğine İlişkin Algıları

**Cringuta Irina PELEA**[2]

**Abstract**

The present article examines and compares the perceptions of online education and learning practice in students from Romania and Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted how university classes have taken place worldwide in the last two years. Furthermore, our purpose was to examine the challenges experienced by students as a result of transitioning from traditional face-to-face classes to online learning. Questions arise from reviewing to what extent the students' cultures have affected their perceptions of the online education and learning process and if there are any substantial differences in the students' feedback regarding various online learning applications which have been used in class or otherwise tested for the first time during this study. The originality of our approach lies in conducting a comparative study to analyze the perceptions of Romanian and Japanese students regarding the educational process during the pandemic. According to our knowledge and extensive research, this is the only similar research that has been conducted or published at this moment on this topic. Furthermore, we would like to emphasize that we have investigated the students' perceptions regarding online education during the pandemic by conducting the reviews in their native languages: Romanian for Romanian students and Japanese for Japanese students. Another original aspect of the current study is testing the feedback of the two groups of participants regarding various digital tools and apps used for educational purposes: the ones who have used the apps for a long time or for the Japanese students who tried these digital tools for the first time. The findings revealed that the Romanian and Japanese students had encountered different challenges in terms of mental health, financial issues, worrying prospects, or varying technical problems, which correspond to a large extent to the profiles of their countries.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Online education, Intercultural study, Romania, Japan, Digital educational tools

**Öz**

Bu makale, son iki yılda dünya çapında üniversite derslerinin nasıl gerçekleştiğini önemli ölçüde etkileyen COVID-19 salgını sırasında Romanya ve Japonya'dan öğrencilerin çevrimiçi öğretim deneyimi ve öğrenme pratiği algılarını incelemekte ve karşılaştırmaktadır. Ayrıca amacımız, geleneksel yüz yüze derslerden çevrimiçi öğrenmeye geçişin bir sonucu olarak öğrencilerin yaşadığı zorlukları incelemekti. Öğrencilerin kültürlerinin çevrimiçi öğretme ve öğrenme sürecine ilişkin algılarını ne ölçüde etkilediği ve sınıfta kullanılan ya da bu çalışma sırasında ilk kez test edilen çeşitli çevrimiçi öğrenme uygulamalarına ilişkin öğrenci geri bildirimlerinde önemli farklılıklar olup olmadığı gibi sorular ortaya çıkmaktadır. Yaklaşımımızın özgünlüğü, Romanyalı ve Japon öğrencilerin salgın sırasındaki eğitim sürecine ilişkin algılarını analiz etmek için karşılaştırmalı bir çalışma yürütülmesinde yatmaktadır. Bilgimize ve kapsamlı araştırmalarımıza göre, bu konuda şu ana kadar benzer başka bir araştırma yapılmamış veya yayınlanmamıştır. Ayrıca, salgın sırasında öğrencilerin çevrimiçi öğretime ilişkin algılarını, görüşmeleri kendi ana dillerinde gerçekleştirerek araştırdığımızı vurgulamak isteriz: Romanyalı öğrenciler için Romence ve Japon öğrenciler için Japonca. Mevcut çalışmanın bir diğer özgün yönü de, eğitim amaçlı kullanılan çeşitli dijital araç ve uygulamalara ilişkin iki katılımcı grubunun geri bildirimlerini test etmektir: uygulamaları uzun süredir kullananlar veya bu dijital araçları ilk kez deneyen Japon öğrenciler için. Bulgular, Romanyalı ve Japon öğrencilerin ruh sağlığı, mali sorunlar, endişe verici beklentiler veya çeşitli teknik sorunlar açısından farklı zorluklarla karşılaştıklarını ve bunların büyük ölçüde ülkelerinin profillerine karşılık geldiğini ortaya koymuştur.

---

[2] Lecturer Ph.D., Titu Maiorescu University, Bucharest, Romania, Faculty of Communication Sciences and International Relations, cringuta.irina.pelea@gmail.com, ORCID 0000-0002-1080-9650.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** COVID-19 salgını, Çevrimiçi öğretim, Kültürlerarası çalışma, Romanya, Japonya, Eğitsel dijital araçlar.

## Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be a major crisis that has significantly impacted both the education sector and academia. Nevertheless, one of the prerogatives of this health crisis is that it has unwillingly accelerated and encouraged digital innovation and progress in the educational system. The forced shift to remote teaching has been perceived differently worldwide and has provided an open space for discussions regarding equity access to education and the potential efficiency of a hybrid and blended learning model as part of the future.

The Romanian and Japanese governments have reacted differently to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the education industry by implementing different sets of measures. Therefore, the students in both countries have responded differently to the accelerated digital transformation imposed by the new health threat.

Albeit there have been studies that have investigated the students' perceptions of online education and learning practice during the educational crises imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, there has yet to be such a comparative study focused on exploring the perceptions of students from Romania and Japan simultaneously.

This article reviews the relevant literature, describes the employed methodology, and then presents and analyses the results. Finally, the study highlights the most critical aspects concerning the findings and addresses recommendations for future research directions that could target the reshaping of the pedagogical approach to fit online education in two different cultural contexts. The present research results may contribute to the academic literature on online education during health crises by integrating the cultural component into its approach.

### 1. Literature Review

In the context of the sudden and rapid spreading of the coronavirus known as COVID-19, on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) "assessed COVID-19 as a global pandemic" (WHO, 2020). The outburst of this pandemic has imposed significant and unprecedented challenges not only for the healthcare system and its professionals (Razu et al., 2021) but also "for the higher education community worldwide," forcing the academic staff to obey the urgent imperative of switching to online classes (Rapanta et al., 2020). Consequently, many teachers were constrained to adjust their teaching routine, practice, and style to the necessities of the pandemic to provide educational content suitable for online delivery through various platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, or Zoom (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021).

Subsequently, Romania announced its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on 26 February 2020, whereas the first detected case in Japan was on 16 January 2020 (Costita, 2020). In this panic-stricken

atmosphere, at the urging of the Romanian authorities, universities have switched to online courses from March 2020 until April 2022, while Japanese universities developed and started online classes from April-May 2020 (Learning Strategy Research Institute, 2020).

As some researchers have pointed out, the forced isolation induced by the pandemic has contributed to increasing the instability of the university system in Romania, simultaneously affecting both the academic staff and the students in terms of emotional health (Butnaru, Niță, Anichiti & Brînză, 2021). Furthermore, the prolonged absence of specific and systematic official measures to regulate the ongoing educational process has worsened the overall circumstances.

Likewise, Japanese universities transitioned abruptly to online lectures as part of an emergency plan in response to the aggressive spreading of the COVID19 (Matsuda, Watanabe & Shigeta, 2021). Nevertheless, as Matsuda and fellows (2021) state, many universities still need more resources to adjust to the students' studying routines and are incapable of developing adequate support methods (Matsuda, Watanabe & Shigeta, 2021).

One significant difference worth noting is that many universities in Japan have provided their students with pre-recorded lectures (Cohen, 2020), while the norm for the Roan universities has been to offer live and interactive online lectures (Teodorescu, Aivaz & Amalfi, 2022).

We have also conducted a systematic review of earlier (comparative) similar studies exploring online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are academic reports dedicated to analyzing online education in Romania and examining the perceptions and expectations of Romanian students for online educational platforms (Buzatu et al., 2020; Pop et al., 2022). On this matter, Buzatu and fellows (2020) state that the Romanian students „surveyed were in favor of online education, they were uncertain if the quality of online education matches the traditional setup. Likewise, Velicu (2021) studied the 2020-2021 school year from the perspective of online education. The scholar mentions the "inflexibility of the system to adjust to the new situations" and that "teachers' main concerns were covering the curriculum and grading the students." Other relevant conclusions of this comprehensive study are that "the digitization of the Romanian educational system has started" and that "one of the gains of the pandemic situation was the strengthening of the partnership among stakeholders" (Velicu, 2021).

Several Japanese-language academic papers have been identified in this regard – we focused on these to increase the importance of the present study, given that such papers remain untranslated until now. Most of the research is dedicated to examining the characteristics of online education, comparing online and face-to-face classes, or investigating the perceptions of Japanese students or teachers regarding online education (Kotaro, 2022; MEXT, 2021). A few cross-cultural studies stand apart. Hosseini and Jahedzadeh (2021) have compared "the online education systems in the University of Tehran in Iran and Osaka University in Japan with a focus on foreign languages education" (Hosseini & Jahedzadeh, 2021). Moreover, other scholars dived into comparing Japanese and Chinese universities during the same

pandemic and explored the infrastructure, development, and efficiency of such online classes in both countries (Yang et al., 2021)

Relevant to the topic of the present study is to review the literature on the digital tools and educational apps to be mentioned. In this regard, we will refer to Pear Deck, Nearpod, Padlet, and Flipgrid.

First, Pear Deck can work as a Google add-on or an independent web-based platform, allowing effective synchronous learning. Based on a standard open slide or template, students can type responses to various questions launched by the teacher, manipulate images or express critical comments and ideas (Grandits & Wagle, 2021). Answers can be shared later in anonymous mode, thus encouraging student commitment in an embarrassment-free environment. Another relevant strength of this app is that it reinforces social-emotional learning (PearDeck, 2022) and increases emotional awareness and empathy in the pandemic context, presenting a higher risk than usual for one's mental health. (Schäfer et al., 2020)

Similar to Pear Deck in terms of interactivity, Nearpod enhances the teaching process and promotes active learning (Hakami, 2020) and collaboration between the teacher and the students in the virtual classroom (Dong et al., 2018) "through interactive lessons and videos, gamified learning, formative assessment, and activities."

In addition to what Pear Deck offers, this digital tool expands the participants' level of comprehension with the "Experience Virtual Reality" option, allowing the students to participate in Virtual Field Trips all over the globe from the comfort of their virtual classroom (Nearpod, 2022).

Useful for e-portfolios ("Portfolios on Padlet," 2022) and various other assignments is Padlet, a web tool that supports interactive, collaborative (Meletiadou, 2021) and both synchronous and asynchronous learning. While borrowing consistent social media functions such as the like buttons, it functions as a virtual wall where students can simultaneously post various media content (photos, YouTube videos, gifs, pdf files, web links, personalized voice messages). Another aspect for which it receives constant praise is its accessibility. The students can access the same web page by sharing the link from different devices, such as PCs, tablets, or even smartphones.

Finally, Flipgrid is a digital tool designed to provide "synchronous video-based discussions in fully online courses" (Lowenthal & Moore, 2020), and it involves students recording short videos to be shared in class or watched at each one's preferred time. The literature review on the efficiency of video-based discussions also shows that group cohesion is more likely to increase due to long-term usage (Pinsk et al., 2014).

The reports by Moore (2022) and Romero-Hall and Vicentini (2017) also show that video-based discussions can improve existing connections between instructors and their students. Likewise, with Flipgrid functioning as a video discussion platform, the comments, and potential questions can be easily added, thus reinforcing group connection, empowering students, and facilitating emotional learning (Moore, 2022; Romero-Hall & Vicentini, 2017).

An Intercultural Comparative Study

## 2. Study Methodology

### 2.1. Background, Motivation, and Context of Research

In light of COVID-19, education has shifted worldwide both for the academic staff and the students, from the regular classroom to various types of virtual platforms incorporated by teachers into their virtual classrooms. In this emerging context of accelerated virtual learning, students' perception of online classes can depend on various factors, including one's culture, educational background, reference system, or computer literacy.

For this comparative study, various reasons are responsible for choosing Romania and Japan as target countries. First and foremost, there is a severe lack of research and academic literature dedicated to comparing these two countries in a particular context, such as the one delivered by the necessity of turning to online education. Very little is known about the cultural peculiarities surrounding the perceptions of Romanian and Japanese students regarding their educational systems. Furthermore, no other study has attempted this cross-cultural comparison by focusing on the problematics of online education. From this perspective, the present research aims to address this issue and fill in the gap. Second, conducting this research in the native languages of the students – Romanian and Japanese language – was possible thanks to the linguistic proficiency of the author, who has consistent experience in handling Japanese-language texts and untranslated Japanese academic resources or delivering similar cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research.

It is an understatement to say that these countries' linguistic and cultural backgrounds are strikingly different. On the one hand, Romania is an East-European country, a member of the E.U. since 2006, and the official language, Romanian, belongs to the "Italic group of languages that devolved from Latin" (Nishan, 2012). On the other hand, Japan is an East-Asian country. Whereas the origins of the Japanese language remain a highly debatable issue, it is unquestionably "a member of the Japonic language family" and employs a multi-script writing system composed of two syllabaries (Hiragana and Katakana) and Kanji (Chinese ideograms) (Vovin, 2017).

Furthermore, various social and cultural differences affect the self-perception of (online) education and learning experience. The education system in Romania has registered significant progress since the fall of communism in 1989 and is targeted to continuously invest in delivering high-quality and equitable education. The younger generations are high-tech savvy and fluent in at least one international language and yet manifest distrust and, in most cases, a critical attitude toward the national educational system (Sandu et al., 2014). Some of the most mentioned problems are:

- the lack of critical thinking, and not fully supporting the students' creativity;

- the social disparity and quality difference in the education provided in the urban versus the rural area;

- the decline in academic quality and knowledge.

Japan's educational system has a different structure, given that the academic year starts in April, compared to Romania, which begins in September or October.

Several cultural concepts and values are also accurately reflected in Japan's educational system. Japanese society values the importance of vertical relationships (jougekankei, 上下関係), and this applies to educational institutions, where words such as "senpai" (senior, 先輩) and "kouhai" (junior, 後輩) are used daily. Other deeply rooted cultural concepts such as "haji" (shame, 恥), "hazukashii" (embarrassment, 恥ずかしい), "giri" (duty, 儀理), "ganbare" (to do one's best, 頑張れ) are part of the cultural mindset of the Japanese students and teachers as well. The competition is very high, leading to the emergence of severe social problems:

- the bullying ("ijime," 虐め), which led in 2020 to the suicide of 419 students (the number represents a yearly average) (Kuwata, 2021);

- the striking economic and social disparity between students;

- the "rounin" phenomenon (浪人: students who failed the university exam entrance – many of them commit suicide due to the exceedingly high social pressure or become "hikikomori – 引きこもり," isolated in their rooms for years);

- the "juku" (cram, 塾) schools;

- the decline in academic ability.

In the case of the present study, the initial conditions are similar in both countries; neither Romania nor Japan has a university system purposely designed to face the challenges of extended lockdowns inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, several significant differences exist between the countries' educational systems and cultural and social profiles. Compared to the national minimum wage, in terms of undergraduate and postgraduate programs, the university fees are substantially lower in Romania than in Japan. The enrolment and graduation requirements, the structure of the academic year, and the curricula present cultural and national particularities in each country. Furthermore, as the cultural, social, and historical backgrounds and the digital development level differ, each country's government has designed particular communication strategies and measures to mitigate the pandemic risks.

## 2.2. Method of Research

The research data has been collected using online focus group interviews. Since this study attempts to provide insight into Romanian and Japanese students' perceptions, opinions, and patterns of thinking regarding online education, the nature of this research is qualitative (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Moreover, the focus group is capable of generating "emic" data (from inside the group) and disclosing

An Intercultural Comparative Study

patterns of behavior, attitudes, or opinions (Cyr, 2019; Morgan, 1996). For these reasons, collecting answers relevant to the research questions and objectives was deemed more appropriate. The data from the interviews were processed, coded, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This method allows for classifying the information from interviews into categories conveying similar meanings (Weber, 2008).

## 2.3. Research Questions

Five research questions and objectives guided this study:

✓        What are the perceptions of Romanian students towards online education?

✓        What are Romanian students' perceptions of their learning practice before/during/after online classes?

✓        What are the perceptions of Japanese students towards online education?

✓        What are Japanese students' perceptions of their learning practice before/during/after online classes?

✓        Are there any differences between Romanian and Japanese students according to their perceptions regarding online classes?

The interview questions to be addressed to the participants are listed below.

-        How do you feel about the online classes?

-        What expressions come to your mind when you think of online classes?

-        Are there any positive aspects of online classes?

-        Are there any negative aspects of online classes?

-        Do you have any worries associated with the online classes?

-         Has your learning routine/studying style experienced any changes since switching to online?

-        What are the biggest challenges you have faced since shifting to online university classes?

-         How do you think Romania/Japan faces the challenges of online education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

## 2.4. Research Design and Participants

The study was conducted from October 2021 to January 2022 in Romania. In order to collect the data for the Romanian students, ten sessions of online focus group interviews were performed using Microsoft Teams. For the Japanese students, another ten sessions took place during the same period on Google Meet. Each interview session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The researcher acted as the

moderator, and an assistant (one of the students) took notes during the sessions with the Romanian students. The researcher took notes after the sessions with the Japanese students. With the participants' permission, the sessions were recorded, stored, transcribed, and analyzed through qualitative content analysis. The coding took place in the following way: every significant sentence was assigned a specific code and then we compiled similar codes in sub-themes relevant to each group of students (Romanian and Japanese). These sub-themes reflected the advantages and disadvantages of online learning and the perceptions and emotions of the students.

The participants were undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at state and private universities, with an average age of 22.3 years old, and 58.9% were females. The students represented five faculties, including Social Sciences, Journalism, Economics, Dentistry, and Foreign Languages. A total of 232 respondents took part, of which 124 were undergraduate and graduate Romanian students and 108 were Japanese undergraduate students.

The focus group discussions also included testing various interactive online tools, such as Pear Deck, Nearpod, Flipgrid, and Padlet, while assessing from a comparative perspective the overall perception.

All the interviews with the Romanian/Japanese students were conducted in the Romanian and Japanese languages, an aspect worth mentioning as strengthening the accuracy of the results and removing any translation-related language barriers that might have hindered the research.        Finally, all obtained interview data was translated into English to serve the purpose of the present study.

## 5. Findings of the Study

### 5.1. Findings of the Group Interviews with the Romanian Students

One of the significant advantages of online classes was **flexibility**, most of them stated. Shifting to the digital environment equals time-saving and was perceived as very convenient, especially for the students who came to the big cities to continue their studies. Most paid less expensive rents in Bucharest or traveling fees at least twice a month.

The 2nd- and 3rd-year students usually have full-time jobs, and for those already working in the labor market, online classes proved to be very advantageous, allowing them **to mingle their studies and jobs**.

> *It is so safe and nice to attend classes from the comfort of your bed, dressed comfortably, and maybe take your breakfast when the lecture begins. (T., 22yo)*

> *In the beginning, the pandemic was a blessing in disguise for me and for all my friends with full-time jobs. I can join the class from work. I can continue my classes and hold on to my job to pay everyday bills. (C, 22 yo)*

Romanian students expressed their **dissatisfaction regarding their concentration ability** during online classes. Many of them constantly mention that it is difficult, sometimes even impossible, to focus on the

lecture at home or in another private space. Especially 3rd-year and Master's students stated that the absence of an appropriate studying space at home had significantly impacted their learning experience and participation in online classes.

> *My grandmother has Alzheimer's and we live together in a small flat. Sometimes, I have to go in the middle of the lecture, check on her, feed her, or change her diaper. I am lucky if I understand 20% of that class. (A., 23 yo)*

> I live in a small flat with my parents, grandmother, and five brothers. I could never turn on my camera during lectures. I can barely focus on classes, and I feel it is useless. (R, 23 yo)

The COVID-19 pandemic outburst has put a strain on the Erasmus student exchange program, and some students mentioned this negative issue:

> *I wanted to study in Poland this year, and I had excellent grades, which would make me an excellent candidate. Now, because of the pandemic, I lost this chance. Everything is unstable. (B., 21 yo)*

> *I was studying in Spain, Madrid, as an Erasmus student in last April (the outbreak of the pandemic, N/T). I decided to come back to Bucharest as fast as possible. There was no point in staying to attend online classes there. It surely didn't feel like the real "Erasmus experience," and my host university did not help at all. (A., 23 yo)*

Many of the 3rd year and graduate students expressed their worries regarding the possibility of switching back the regular classes much faster than they could handle:

> *I am dead worried of having to go back to uni now (since May, N/T). I will lose my job without any doubt. I could never attend face-to-face classes and go back to working full-time. I don't understand why authorities expec3rd-yeard year students) to go back just for a couple of weeks. It is absurd and it lacks any kind of consideration toward every working student struggling with paying the rent in Bucharest. (C., 23 yo)*

Most students blamed their inability to focus during online classes on the **heavy curricula**.

> *We have days with four lectures and this makes us spend like 8 hours in front of the computer. Sure, we get 10 minute-breaks but I feel it is not enough. After eight hours of studying in front of the computer, I feel exhausted... and this happens weekly. (A., 21 yo)*

Another issue affecting their studying routing and concentration power was the instability of the labor market in Romania during the pandemic.

> *In these last two years, I have changed my job five times and I know that many of my colleagues are in the same situation as I am. Many small companies went bankrupt during this pandemic. Worrying about keeping my job makes me neglect my studies and all my assignments. I find myself working overtime for no extra payment to convince my boss I am worth this job. I don't know how I will put up with the exam sessions and the graduation exam. (E, 22 yo)*

Most Romanian students identified the major disadvantage of online classes as **the lack of nonverbal**

**communication and bonding** with their friends during break time.

> What I badly miss is smoking a cigar with my colleagues after lectures. Nothing in the world can replace that feeling. Sure, we still talk on Whatsapp or video call but it is not the same. (S., 23 yo)

> We are almost through our first year at the university and I don't even know what my colleagues look like. Although I can recognize their voice. (B., 19 yo)

This situation affected as well how online seminars took place. Whereas team tasks were usual in the face-to-face learning context, teaching and learning on platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Google Meet forced the academic staff and the students to switch to **individual assignments and projects** more often.

> When we go back to normal, I am not sure I will remember how to work in a team. This online education thing seems adequate for a month or two at the most. In the beginning, I was so happy. It was like a dream but after about the first three months, it proved to be a nightmare. I work from home and I learn from home. Everything is in front of a computer. It is very depressing. (G., 22 yo)

The same idea was supported by many Romanian participants, who stated that they **spend up to 12 hours a day** using the computer for tasks related to their academic studies or remote jobs.

> *"I would have never believed I will get to think I am sick of my computer. I have terrible headaches after eight hours of online classes."* (M., 23 yo)

Romanian students have different learning practices and exhibit other behavior patterns in online classes, being more prone to turn off their cameras during the course. In contrast, the Japanese students do not (as we will see in the following section). The Romanians are more familiar with discussing and analyzing various topics relevant to the class with the professor.

### 5.2. Findings of the Group Interviews with the Japanese Students

One of the strengths online classes presented compared to the usual academic setting is that the student could **choose by themselves the place** from where they could attend the lecture.

The second one explicitly mentioned is the feeling of having **a personalized rhythm for studying** in and outside classes.

> *"When I am studying alone, I think I have more time to focus on myself to see if I understand everything but when I was going to the university I had the chance to hear other students' opinions and that made me think in depth."* (M., 22 yo)

Moreover, "**grasping and understanding new concepts seemed easier in online classes**," Being in one's private space provided a certain feeling of security. If pre-recorded lectures were pre-recorded, it was "**very comfortable with pausing the video and googling** in search for an answer, thus increasing one's absorption of the new content." On a side note, Romanian participants had no experience with pre-recorded lectures.

An Intercultural Comparative Study

Concerning the same matter, another participant has added:

> *"I have more control with pre-recorded classes. I can even fast-forward if the content is not that interesting. For instance, when the teacher explains how the class will go on, I always skip that part. I always work on the tasks related to my grades." (K., 22yo)*

A consensus was that traditional university classes are more "centered on school life, "whereas online classes are more **flexible than traditional classes**: one can study and attend the lectures from one's desired location and sometimes even at one's ideal time.

> *"Since the pandemic started, I have also looked for other online classes with no connection to my studies, because I had an interest in that kind of information" (S., 19yo)*

A noteworthy advantage frequently indicated is how they spent commuting time studying online. Some of the participants spent even up to three hours a day going to the university and characterized this lost time as being "もったいない," "mottainai."

> "I always felt the commuting time is such a loss, spending so many hours just to get to university and then to come back home. It was such a shame but now I can save that time and do useful things for my family." (M., 23 yo)

Several negative aspects were also discussed. The Japanese students proved to be "**more worried about the outcome of the educational process**," many of them stated that online education is less effective in the long term than face-to-face classes. Most have expressed consistent worries about how the pandemic will affect their grades, graduation, and future employment prospects, afraid that potential employers might consider them less prepared. According to their statements, the pressure is higher than in the regular classes before the pandemic.

Nevertheless, the **significantly increased number of homework assignments** was considered the main stress factor during the pandemic, signalizing thus an intensifying academic pressure and expectations from the teachers.

Attending online classes from the comfort of one's private space comes, nevertheless, with the "disadvantage of feeling **lonely**" (as in "寂しい," "sabishii") since the opportunities for meeting one's friends have decreased significantly. This loneliness was attributed to changing their learning styles and study routine inflicted by the online classes. We refer here to "学び合い," "manabiai," the custom of studying together with one's friends, indeterminately suspended during the pandemic.

> "It feels nostalgic not to take pictures at the end of the year with my colleagues and my friends. It is something I feel I have been missing out. I have also missed sharing food with my university friends and going out with them just to drink some tea." (R., 21 yo)

Another participant has also mentioned:

"At face-to-face classes, we used to talk a lot after that class. If I didn't understand something, it was much easier to ask one of my colleagues but now because of the pandemic, we could not do that anymore. y miss that little chat we had immediately after classes." (Y., 23 yo)

1st-year students also related to the situation:

"In the beginning, I wished for face-to-face classes to start faster so I can make friends but now that we started going again, I feel stressed about how many new things, places, and people I have to meet. Everybody expects me to adapt very fast. Sometimes it feels overwhelming" (T., 22 yo)

Communication with one's friends has worsened. Most of them felt that the chances of consulting the university staff concerning various worries were much lower.

Nevertheless, overall communication on all levels during online classes was perceived as "**emotionless**."

"It is true that there are so many chat functions and options so you can transmit the information as you wish to do. Even so, it feels lacking in emotions. Sometimes, when we communicate, we change our message according to our friend's facial expression which reveals how he feels about our words. I can't do this when we communicate online. I am constantly worrying about the possibility of having told something offensive." (R., 22 yo)

"It feels like survival mode. Even when we spend several minutes turning on our cameras, there will always be some students who do not wish to do so and use stuffed toys or masks to show on camera instead of their faces. I think it must be very lonely for the teacher as well, to have to teach students without seeing any facial expression." (M., 22 yo)

Furthermore, they reported a "**persistent physical weariness**," which they described as difficult to fight. The Japanese students have also expressed insecurities about addressing questions in online classes, given that they were not accustomed to doing so in classes before the pandemic. Very few opportunities were given to ask questions during the online class and participate in interactive tasks.

From an overall perspective, the most frequently mentioned negative emotions Japanese students associated the online classes are the following ones:

- general anxiety,

- financial anxiety (related to one's risky financial situation or to the fact that some of them were experiencing financial hardship that threatened their graduation prospects),

- job hunting anxiety (for final year undergraduate students),

- the feeling of being isolated,

- solitude,

- a sense of meaningless (as in having no purpose for a living),

An Intercultural Comparative Study

-        worries concerning the learning output and long-time effectiveness of online classes.

Another issue brought into discussion by many Japanese students is the **problematic Internet access** in rural areas. **Data costs can rise to a prohibitively high level**, especially if one has a less advantageous contract with an Internet provider and many online classes to attend.

> *"To be honest, it feels like I have fewer chances than the students living in the big cities with good internet connections. It feels unfair to have my grades and my academic results dictated by how good my connection is. I hope most of my professors will be kind and will consider this aspect.* (M., 22yo)*"*

The Internet quality was also responsible for how online classes took place: sometimes, the students would turn off their cameras, with the teacher's consent, to improve the Internet connection.

> *"Sometimes it was the teacher to tell us that it would be better to turn off our cameras. The Internet connection was just too bad. And that day when we had this online class, was very refreshing. I just wore casual clothing, without fixing my hair or having to put on makeup." (N., 23 yo)*

However, the usage of webcams during online classes was frequently regulated by the teachers, mainly if it was the case of a virtual seminar that implied a low number of participants:

> *"At seminars, the professor usually told us that it is much easier to communicate if we see each other. We needed to discuss various topics and address questions. He always recommended us to turn on our cameras because he wants to see our faces." (T.,22 yo)*

At this point, another young female participant added:

> *"I would rather skip that class than show up without no makeup; it would make me feel insecure." (S., 23 yo)*

Other students have stated, in concern to the same subject:

> *"Some of us even told the teacher that our PC is not working that well and because of this reason we cannot turn on our cameras. Yet, this is not a lie you can use that often." (M., 22yo)*

> *"If there are no specific recommendations regarding the camera, I will not turn it on purposely. Sometimes it feels odd." (N., 22yo)*

> *"I feel I have a sort of reluctance in showing my face on camera." (N., 22yo)*

In this digital learning context, some students reported that they had experienced **problems using virtual backgrounds**.

> *"I was at an online class, and I turned on my camera, in my room where I just had an "onrain nomi-kai" (online drinking party, TN). I simply forgot that everybody in the class, including our teacher, can see my room where the party just took place (the bottles of alcohol and leftovers of food, TN). Then, the lecturer said to me: "That is a very interesting background you have over there." I was very embarrassed." (R., 23yo)*

However, a delicate issue is that **the tuition fees** were not lowered, even though all courses were taught online, and students did not benefit from any facilities their universities could have offered. A 4th-year student explained his situation, which seemed to be relevant for a more significant number of students:

> *"I don't even feel like a student. I spent the last two years in front of my personal computer and I don't even understand why I have to pay so much… I lost my part-time job, yet nobody seems to understand how hard it is… Most of my friends think the same. It is such a waste."* (T, 23 yo)

### 5.3. Feedback and Impressions about Different Educational Digital Tools and Apps

### 5.3.1. The Romanian students

Concerning the usage of applications in online classes, the Romanian participants were already familiar with Padlet, Pear Deck, Nearpod, and Flipgrid.

The one they appreciated the most was Pear Deck, particularly the slide that checked their stress level or the open-ended questions, allowing them to write and share their opinions on a specific subject. It is worth mentioning that these digital tools were used in Social Sciences and Communication lectures and seminars.

Padlet proved to be more popular than Wakelet, allowing the students to write comments in real-time on their colleagues' portfolios and to add social media reactions, gifs, and short videos. This app proved to be an asset for teamwork tasks during the seminars, another reason it enjoyed such a high reputation.

Nearpod was perceived as more minor "visually attractive than Pear Deck, for instance. However, the most enjoyable feature was the "interactive video," edited by the teacher with specific questions tailored to fit the objectives of a class.

The one they characterized as being the least friendly is Flipgrid, which makes them feel less comfortable, given the premise of recording oneself and sharing the video with one's colleagues.
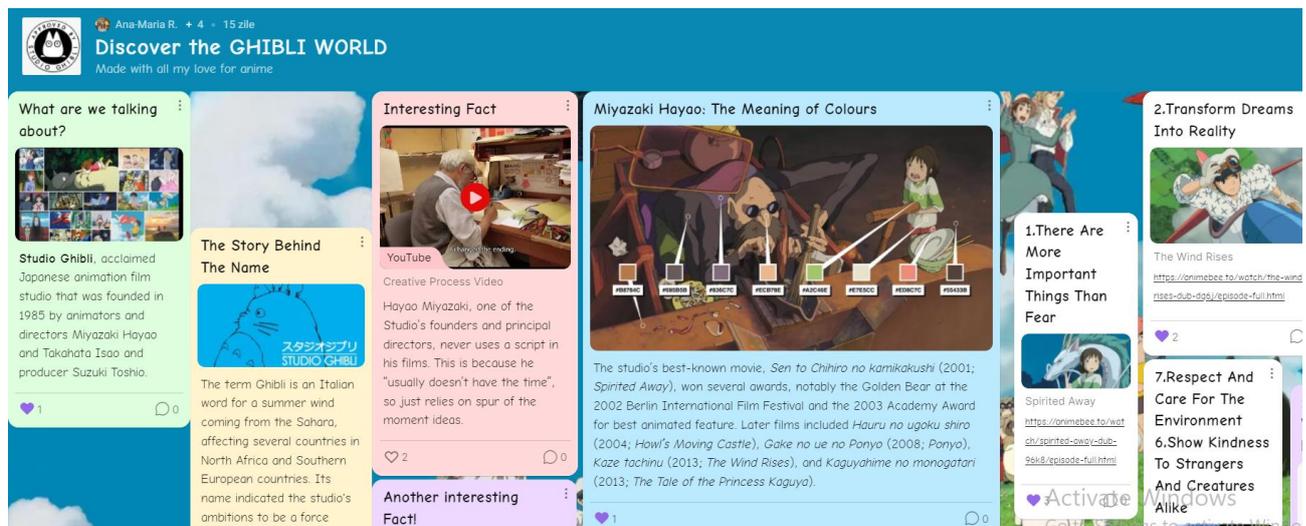


**Figure 1.** Sample of a Padlet digital portfolio on the topic of "Anime Culture and Japanese Media: Discover the

An Intercultural Comparative Study

Ghibli World".

**Source**: A Romanian Master's student, in the "Sociology of Entertainment Media" course. The Faculty of Journalism and Sciences of Communication, the University of Bucharest.
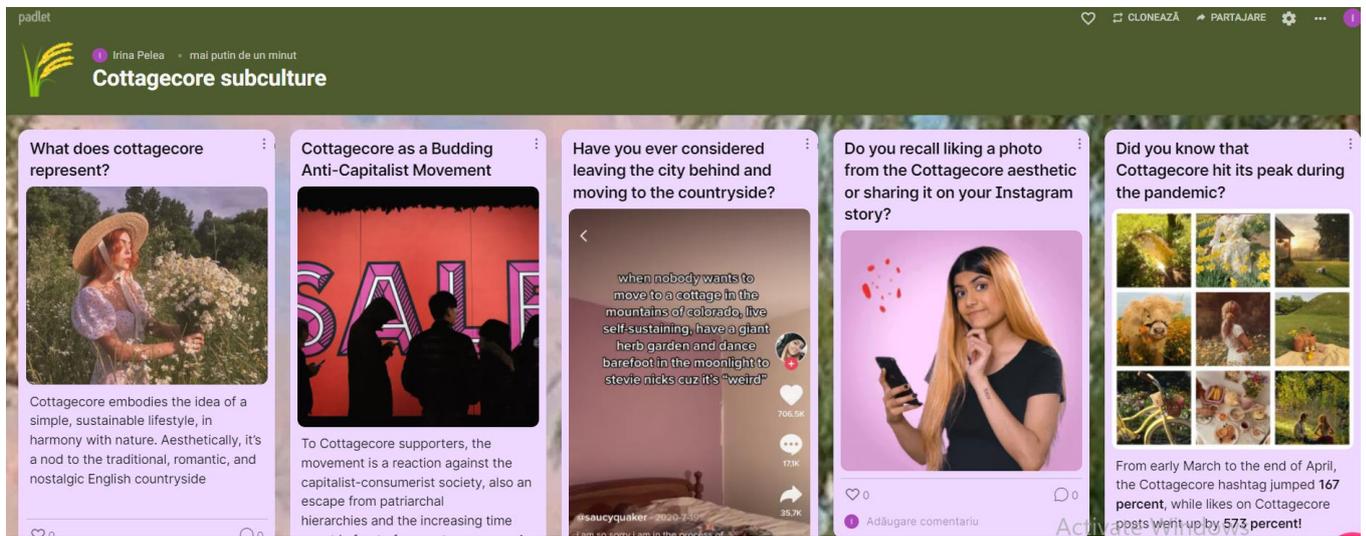


**Figure 2.** Sample of a Padlet digital portfolio on the topic of "Subcultures and the mainstream public: Cottage subculture".

**Source**: A Romanian Master's student, the "Sociology of Entertainment Media" course. The Faculty of Journalism and Sciences of Communication, the University of Bucharest.
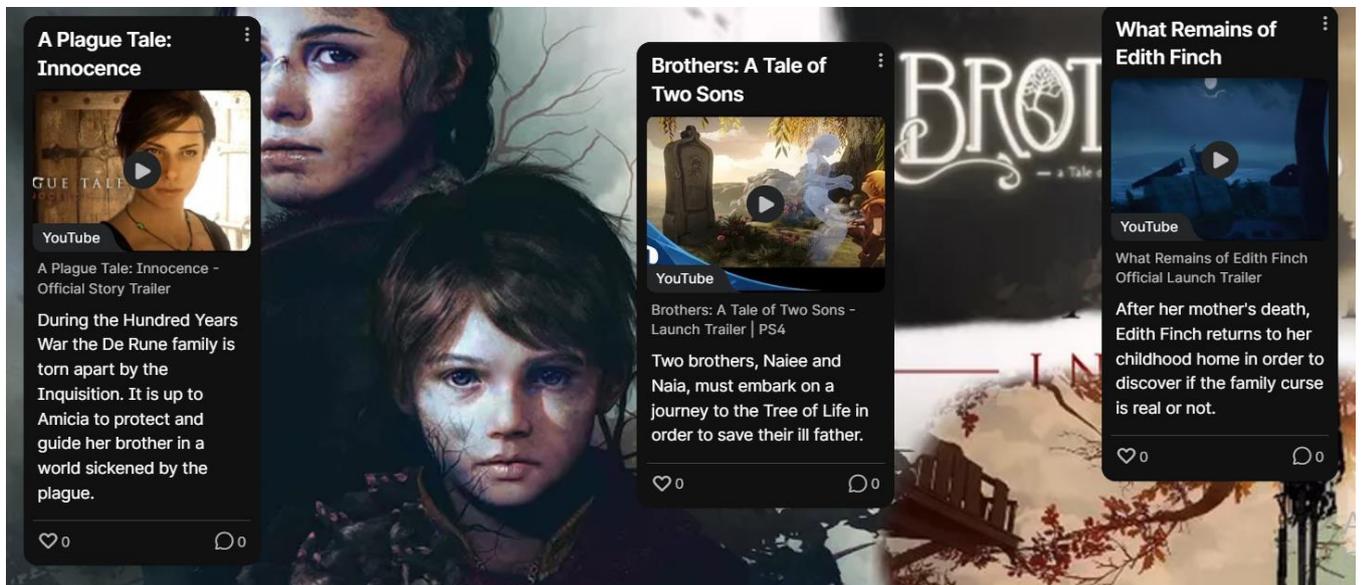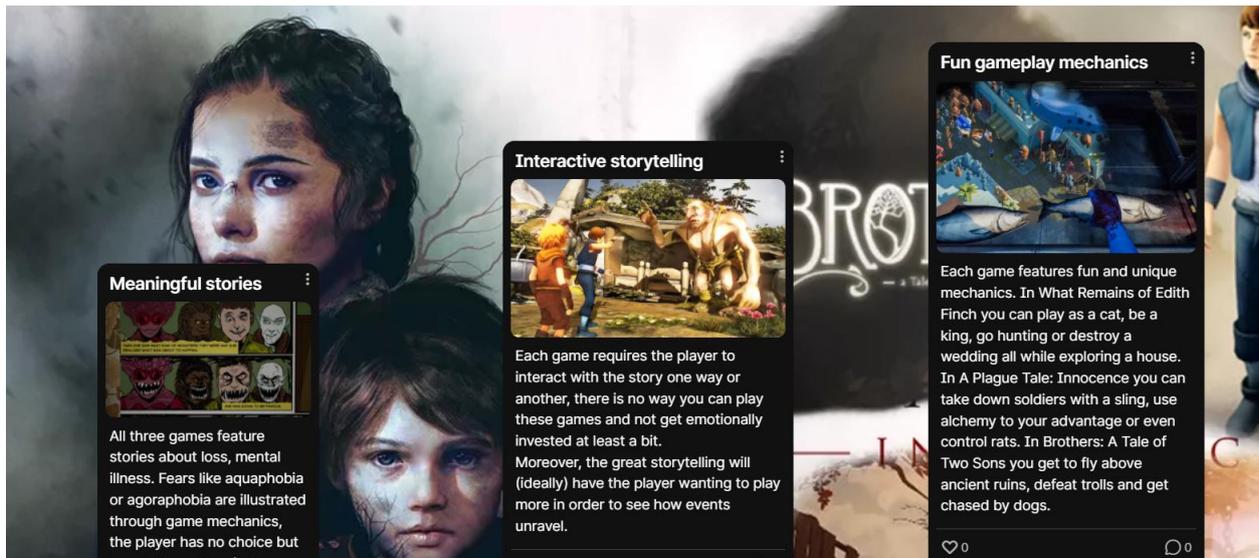
**Figure 3.** Samples of a Padlet digital portfolio on the topic of "Video Games as Entertainment Media".

**Source**: A Romanian Master's student, the "Sociology of Entertainment Media" course. The Faculty of Journalism and Sciences of Communication, the University of Bucharest.

An Intercultural Comparative Study

**Figure 4**. Samples of a Padlet digital portfolio on the topic of "Efficient communication and persuasion in cultural context".

**Source**: A Spanish Erasmus student, the "Strategies of efficient communication in Public Relations" course. The Faculty of International Relations and Sciences of Communication, Titu Maiorescu University.



**Figure 5.** Samples of a Padlet digital portfolio on the topic of "Spain: Communication and public relations strategies for the public/private/non-profit sector".

**Source**: A Spanish Erasmus student, the "Public Relations for the public, private, and non-profit sectors" course. The Faculty of International Relations and Sciences of Communication, Titu Maiorescu University.

**Figure 6.** Samples of interactive Pear Deck slides promoting emotional learning.

**Source:** Pear Deck official website.

An Intercultural Comparative Study
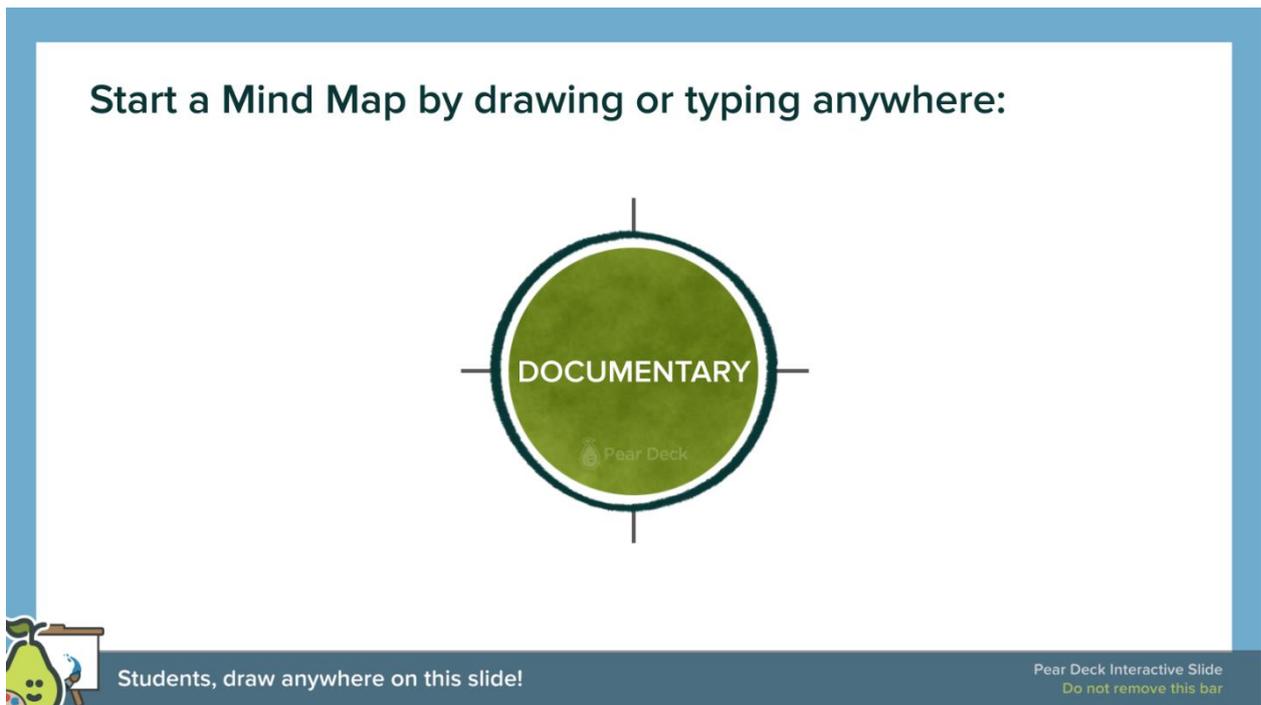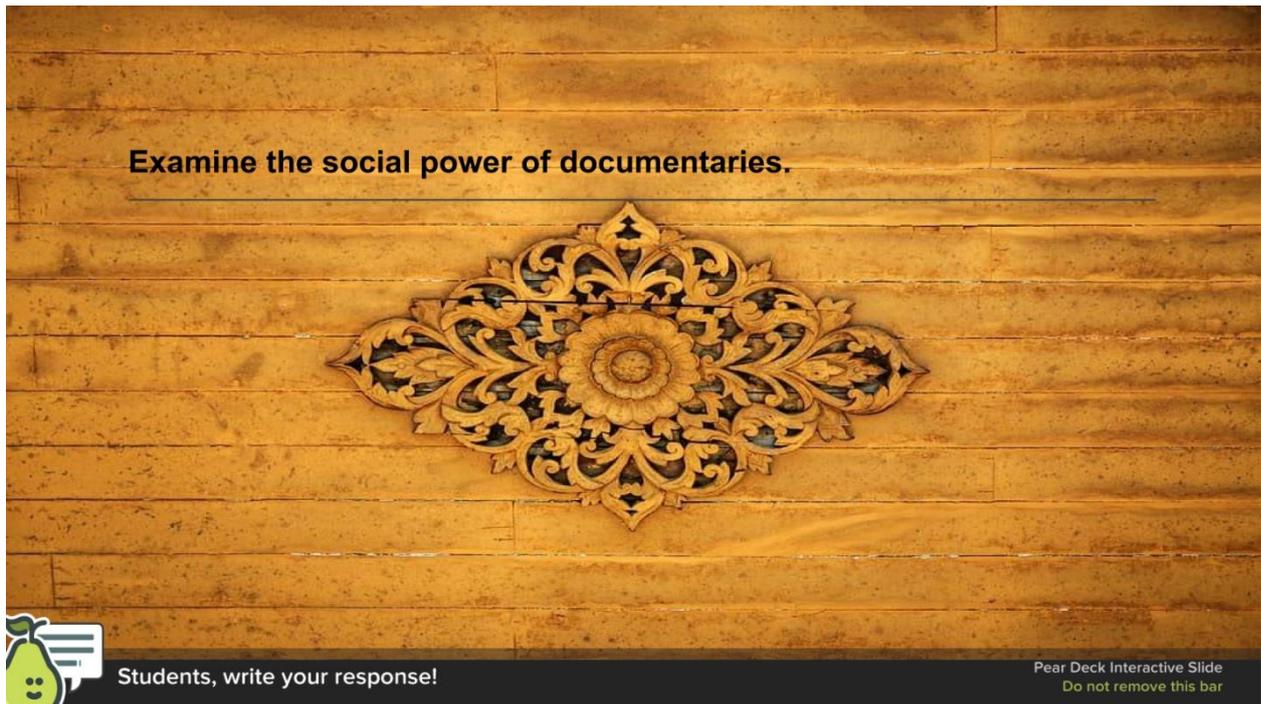


**Figure 7.** Samples of Pear Deck interactive slides designed by the professor/author for online classes.

**Source:** Personal database.

### 5.3.2. The Japanese students

No Japanese participant was familiar with any interactive applications designed to be integrated into the online education process, increase the attractiveness of the content, and adjust the students (e.g., Pear Deck, Nearpod, Flipgrid).

The Japanese students were asked to test these four digital tools mimicking an online English class (intermediate level).

Regarding Pear Deck, most of them said they perceive it as "ideal for seminars" but not for the usual lectures. Sharing anonymized answers for discussion is "efficient." It is a feature highly compatible with the cultural background of the students.

> "I would be more relaxed knowing that if I make a mistake, nobody will know it was me, and I would still get the chance to correct it. This seems awesome." (R., 22 yo)

Padlet was appreciated for the comments section:

> "For sure, it is much better than the usual PPT presentation. It would be nice to present a project in class and my colleagues to leave encouraging comments, which would make me smile, I think." (T., 22 yo)

However, it was perceived as adequate for humanities, foreign languages, and social sciences students.

> "It seems very interesting but I am not sure how we could use that in Economics. It would be nice to study English using this. I would feel motivated". (S., 22 yo)

Although Pear Deck has several template slides for Mathematics, the students perceived those slides as "inconsistent" and "unlikely to fit our classes."

Nearpod was characterized as "simple" and "not that attractive" in terms of aesthetics. The gaming feature "had potential," but it is "overly simplistic" to make one study more using it.

Finally, Flipgrid could be used in the virtual classroom instead of holding a public speech in person in an open space:

> "I would feel at ease knowing that I have to record a video of myself and show is how teacher and colleagues, instead of giving a speech in a full room of people. I am very emotional and I get embarrassed very fast. However, it would be practical to know beforehand that we will be using this at class… to put on my makeup, even though the filters are very useful…" (M., 22 yo)

## 6. Limitations of the Research

One of the limitations encountered is culturally rooted, meaning that most Japanese students were reluctant to express less favorable opinions regarding the teaching process and their satisfaction with the learning practice. Furthermore, most of these students shared a certain shyness about the researcher, who was perceived in the first online sessions more as a "professor" instead of an interviewer. We had to "read" through their reluctance and interpret their answers through the lenses of Japanese culture and etiquette.

Expressing their opinions about the problems and difficulties they had struggled with in online classes was the most challenging aspect. It was much easier to conduct the interviews with the Romanian students, who confessed to being very comfortable with the environment, as they were already acquainted with the researcher as their teacher.

An Intercultural Comparative Study

Another limitation is related to the schedule of the group interviews, which were initially planned to cover twelve weeks but were extended up to fourteen weeks. Finally, as the interviews were conducted online, important information dictated by the participant's body language might have been omitted, irrespective of their nationality.

## Conclusions

The current study explored the perceptions of Romanian and Japanese students regarding the teaching and learning practices associated with online university classes during the consecutive lockdowns enforced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A significant practical implication of this research is that it hints at how digital tools could be adjusted to fit from a cultural and social perspective to Japanese online university classes (for instance, some Japanese students express their lack of comfort when they had to assess their stress of comprehension level with ready-made Pear Deck slides, unlike the Romanian students who appreciated the most this feature).

A social implication is that the study presented two different online educational models from two distant countries (in terms of geographical distance and culture).

Therefore, further (qualitative) research can be conducted to analyze how the online education process can be tailored according to the students' cultures to increase their learning motivation and overall efficiency of the teaching process. The research findings conclude that both groups of participants manifested consistent dissatisfaction regarding online education, which is to be attributed more likely to the online environment and digital platforms and not particularly to the didactic practices of the academic staff. Nevertheless, the Japanese students expressed more interest in the online courses and were more eager to prove their engagement than the Romanian students. Furthermore, consistent gender differences arose among the Japanese participants, whereas neutrality was characteristic for the Romanian youngsters.

On the one hand, the Romanian participants enjoyed the experience thanks to the time-saving opportunity they were provided, allowing them to keep full-time jobs while also studying. On the other hand, the Japanese participants mentioned the same time-saving factor, albeit they associated it with the culturally-specific commuting time they would have otherwise lost on their way to university. The later ones proved to have firm expectations of being delivered the information (they are more focused on passive learning).

The Romanians were more focused on the present situation. In contrast, the Japanese constantly worry about how the pandemic will affect their future job prospects and negatively influence employers' opinions regarding their abilities and knowledge. On a side note, no Romanian students have manifested this worrying issue.

Regarding interactivity in class and usage of specific educational apps and digital tools, the Romanian students manifested more experience and knowledge, engaging more in conversation analysis with the professor. In contrast, Japanese students were accustomed to the one-direction, monotonous teaching method, and traditional out-of-class projects and assignments.

It is worth pointing out the intrinsic impact of the participant's language and culture on their perceptions concerning online education. For instance, Romanian students have frequently associated online classes with negative emotions expressed by "stronger" words such as "stressful," "ambiguous," and "unsure," while the Japanese ones have indicated culturally-specific words corresponding to well-rooted socio-cultural values, such as "embarrassing," "difficult," "not that interesting," "hard," "lonely," "isolated," or "unease."

Nevertheless, digital educational tools do not seem to be tailored to fit Japanese students' cultural and social profiles. Albeit, in most cases, the official websites of the apps and the user interface have been translated into Japanese, some of them (e.g., Pear Deck) proved to be more culturally accessible to the Romanian students.

## References

Al-Kumaim, N., Alhazmi, A., Mohammed, F., Gazem, N., Shabbir, M., & Fazea, Y. (2021) Exploring the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on University Students' Learning Life: An Integrated Conceptual Motivational Model for Sustainable and Healthy Online Learning. *Sustainability*, *13*(5), 2546. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13052546

Butnaru, G., Niță, V., Anichiti, A., & Brînză, G. (2021). The Effectiveness of Online Education during COVID-19 Pandemic. A Comparative Analysis between the Perceptions of Academic Students and High School Students from Romania. *Sustainability*, *13*(9), 5311. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13095311

Buzatu, A. R., Cojoc, C., Cotovici, E., Spirache, M. C., Trandafir, R., & Paun, M. (2020). Students' perception of online education in the COVID-19 pandemic framework. *Romanian Statistical Review*, *3,* 3-14.

Cyr, J. (2019). *Focus groups for the Social Science Researcher*. UK: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316987124.

Dong, Y., Kavun, N., Senteney, M. & Ott, J. (2018). Interactive Presentation Tools Using Mobile Devices. In E. Langran & J. Borup (Eds.), *Proceedings of Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference* (pp. 743-748). Washington, D.C., United States: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE).

Grandits, D., & Wagle, T. (2021). Making Remote Learning Engaging. *Excelsior: Leadership In Teaching and Learning*, *13*(2), 113-126. https://doi.org/10.14305/jn.19440413.2021.13.2.03.

Hakami, M. (2020). Using Nearpod as a Tool to Promote Active Learning in Higher Education in a BYOD Learning Environment. *Journal of Education and Learning*, *9*(1), 119-126. https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v9n1p119.

Hosseini, A., & Jahedzadeh, B. (2021). テヘラン大学と大阪大学におけるオンラインでの語学授業の実施とその課題について：筆者らの経験を 中心 [The Implementation and Related Challenges of Online Classes for Foreign Language Education in University of Tehran and Osaka University]. *The Frontier of Foreign Languages Education*, 59–70. Retrieved from https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/repo/ouka/all/79360/ffle_04_059.pdf.

Kotaro, K. (2022). *学生から見えたオンライン授業について [About online classes from the perspective of the students]* (Unpublished Master's Thesis). Gakushuin University, Japan.

Lowenthal, P., & Moore, R. (2020). Exploring Student Perceptions of Flipgrid in Online Courses. *Online Learning*, *24*(4), 28-41. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v24i4.2335.

Matsuda, T., Watanabe, Y., & Shigeta, K. (2021). Factors Affecting University Students' At-home Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic -Implications for a Student Support System. *International Journal Of Educational Media And Technology*, *15*(1), 56-66.

Meletiadou, E. (2021). Using Padlets as E-Portfolios to Enhance Undergraduate Students' Writing Skills and Motivation. *IAFOR Journal Of Education, 9*(5), 67-83. https://doi.org/10.22492/ije.9.5.04.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, M. A. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. London: SAGE.

Moore, R. (2022). Interacting at a distance: Creating engagement in online learning environments. In E. Ntuli, C. Agyeman & J. Blankson (Eds.), *Handbook of research on strategic management of interaction, presence, and participation in online courses* (pp. 401-425). New York, NY: IGI Global.

Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus Groups. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *22*(1), 129–152. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.129.

Nishan, R. (2012). The Romanian Language Yesterday and Today. *Journal of the American Society of Geolinguistics*, *38,* 25-30.

Pinsk, R., Curran, M. J., Poirier, R., & Coulson, G. (2014). Student perceptions of the use of student-generated video in online discussions as a mechanism to establish social presence for non-traditional students: A case study. *Issues in Information Systems, 15*(1), 267–276.

Pop, M.-D., Pugna, A. P., Crețu, V.-I., & Potra, S. A. (2022). Two years of hybrid education in Romania: A comparative overview of the students' expectations for the online educational platforms. *Sustainability*, *14*(21), 14241. https://doi.org/10.3390/su142114241.

Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P., Guàrdia, L., & Koole, M. (2020). Online University Teaching During and After the COVID-19 Crisis: Refocusing Teacher Presence and Learning Activity. *Postdigital Science and Education*, *2*(3), 923-945. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00155-y.

Razu, S., Yasmin, T., Arif, T., Islam, M., Islam, S., Gesesew, H., & Ward, P. (2021). Challenges Faced by Healthcare Professionals During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Inquiry from Bangladesh. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *9,* 647315. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.647315.

Romero-Hall, E., & Vicentini, C. R. (2017). Multimodal interactive tools for online discussions and assessment. In P. Vu, S. Fredrickson, & C. Moore (Eds.), *Handbook of research on blended learning pedagogies and professional development in higher education* (pp. 85–105). New York, NY: IGI Global.

Schäfer, S., Sopp, M., Schanz, C., Staginnus, M., Göritz, A., & Michael, T. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on Public Mental Health and the Buffering Effect of a Sense of Coherence. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, *89*(6), 386-392. https://doi.org/10.1159/000510752.

Teodorescu, D., Aivaz, K., & Amalfi, A. (2022). Factors affecting motivation in online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic: the experiences of students at a Romanian public university. *European Journal of Higher Education*, (3), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2021.1972024.

Vovin, A. (2017). Origins of the Japanese language. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics,* 1-34. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.013.277.

Weber, R. P. (2008). *Basic content analysis*. London: Sage.

Yang, C. Nomakuchi, T., Gao, H., & Taniguchi, Y. (2021). コロナ禍におけるオンライン授業の日中比較 [Comparative Study of Online Learning between Japan and China during Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)]. *Annual Report of the Institute of Economic Research, 53*, 333-354.

**Online References**

Cohen, S. (2020, September 20). "A digital pivot at Japan's universities: 'A lot of us expected to have our worst semesters online". Retrieved on May 16, 2022, from https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2020/09/20/lifestyle/japanese-universities-online-coronavirus/

Costita, G. (2020, February 26). "The First Coronavirus Case in Romania." Retrieved on March 30, 2022, from https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/primul-caz-de-coronavirus-in-romania-1266806.

Kuwata, A. (2021, October 14). "小中高校の自殺者数、過去最多の 415 人...文科省調査. 教育業界ニュース". Retrieved on November 21, 2022, from https://reseed.resemom.jp/article/2021/10/14/2460.html.

Learning Strategy Research Institute. (2020, July 16). *Daigaku Niokeru Online Jugyou no Kinkyuu Dounyuu Ni Kansuru Chousa Houkokusho [Report on Emergency Introduction of Online Classes at Universities]*. Retrieved from https://www.digital-knowledge.co.jp/archives/22823/

MEXT. (2021). "*新型コロナウイルス感染症の影響による学生等の 学生生活に関する調査(結果).*"Retrieved on November 21, 2022, from https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20210525-mxt_kouhou01-000004520_1.pdf.

Nearpod. (2022). "However you teach, it's in Nearpod". Retrieved on April 19, 2022, from https://nearpod.com/.

PearDeck. (2022). "Social-Emotional Learning Templates". Retrieved on March, 14, 2022, from https://www.peardeck.com/pear-deck-blog/social-emotional-learning-templates.

Portfolios on Padlet. (2022). "Portfolios". Retrieved on March 29, 2022, from https://padlet.com/blog/portfolios

Sandu, D., Stoica, C. A., & Umbres, R. (2014). "Romanian youth: worries, aspirations, values and life style". Retrieved on November 21, 2022, from https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bukarest/12141.pdf.

Velicu, A. (2021). "The school year 2020-2021 in Romania during the pandemic". Retrieved on November 21, 2022, from https://ketlib.lib.unipi.gr/xmlui/bitstream/handle/ket/3777/edu_covid_techical_report_romania_final_28.06_v2.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

WHO. (2020, March 11). "Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020". Retrieved on June 30, 2022, from https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020.