



Exploring Educators' Lived Experiences in Online Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Study of University Lecturers in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Online education has become a critical component of modern pedagogy, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic forced a rapid transition to digital platforms. However, the personal and professional experiences of educators navigating this shift remain underexplored, especially in terms of the emotional and relational aspects of teaching in a digital environment. Despite numerous studies on technology and teaching outcomes, there is a clear research gap in understanding how educators' emotional well-being and professional identity are reshaped in response to digital transitions. This study addresses the gap by adopting a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of educators during the pandemic. Specifically, it investigates measurable outcomes such as levels of emotional strain, changes in engagement strategies, and the degree of identity reconstruction among educators. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 educators, and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify key themes. The findings reveal that educators faced significant challenges related to engagement, technology, and professional identity, but also found opportunities for growth and flexibility. These findings imply the necessity of structured institutional interventions, such as professional development programs, peer-support networks, and mental health resources, to better equip educators for future digital teaching environments. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of online education and provides valuable insights for improving educator support in future digital learning environments.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of technology has significantly transformed various sectors, including education, leading to an increased reliance on digital platforms for teaching and learning (Hashimi et al., 2022). One of the most profound shifts in education occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated the transition from traditional in-person teaching to online learning almost overnight (Zhang et al., 2024). This global disruption in the education sector has highlighted both the potential and the challenges of digital education, particularly within higher education institutions. While technology offers unprecedented accessibility and flexibility, it also creates barriers such as engagement difficulties, digital literacy gaps, and emotional strain for educators and students. The relevance of this phenomenon is particularly evident in the context of higher education, where the role of educators is not limited to the transmission of knowledge but extends to fostering holistic development, including character-building and personal growth (Riain & O'Leary, 2024; Terblanche & Lubbe, 2024). Prior research has mainly examined technological adoption and student outcomes (Crawford et al., 2021; Gomes et al., 2021), but fewer studies have systematically linked these findings to educators' emotional labor, professional identity, and pedagogical adjustments in digital settings.

This gap underscores the need for a framework that connects the technical with the relational aspects of online teaching. Drawing on socio-constructivist and identity theories, this study positions educators not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as professionals negotiating new roles within a rapidly digitized environment. The theoretical lens emphasizes how digital transitions reshape professional identity, teaching strategies, and educator–student relationships, extending beyond earlier studies that focused narrowly on tools or student performance. This sharper theoretical grounding provides the basis for exploring how educators make sense of their online teaching experiences.

Understanding the personal experiences of educators navigating this transition is crucial (Malmstrom Zinkel et al., 2025). These experiences are shaped by both the technical aspects of online teaching and the emotional and relational dimensions that define the teaching profession (Witte et al., 2023). This study aims to explore these lived experiences in depth, acknowledging that the meaning educators attach to their online teaching experiences may provide valuable insights into the broader educational landscape. The subjective nature of these experiences makes phenomenology an appropriate approach for this research, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of how educators perceive and make sense of the challenges and opportunities presented by online learning. By focusing on the lived experiences of educators, this study seeks to uncover the essence of their experiences, offering a deeper understanding of the personal and professional implications of teaching in the digital age.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become an essential area of study, particularly in fields such as education, where understanding subjective perceptions can offer rich insights into both personal and professional outcomes (Crawford et al., 2021; Gomes et al., 2021). In the context of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring the personal experiences of educators provides a critical understanding of how they navigated the sudden shift to digital platforms and adapted their teaching methods. The importance of this approach lies in its ability to illuminate the nuanced challenges and adjustments that educators faced, which may not be fully captured by quantitative data or generalized findings.

To address this gap, the study adopts a phenomenological approach, which is well suited to capturing the interplay between emotional, relational, and professional dimensions of teaching. Unlike traditional quantitative methods that emphasize outcomes, phenomenology allows for a nuanced understanding of how educators construct meaning in response to unprecedented challenges (Eadie et al., 2021. Ghiasvand et al., 2024). By situating phenomenology within this theoretical framework, the study not only investigates lived experiences but also connects them to broader discourses on professional identity and pedagogical transformation.

The findings of such an approach are expected to provide insights into how institutional support, technological infrastructure, and broader socio-cultural contexts shape educators' experiences (Fang et al., 2024). In doing so, the study contributes both conceptually—by refining the theoretical connections between technology, identity, and pedagogy—and practically—by offering guidance for policies and support systems that enhance educators' capacity to thrive in digital teaching environments. In the context of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, many studies have utilized practical, conventional approaches, focusing on measurable outcomes such as student performance, technological access, or course completion rates (Trust & Whalen, 2021). These studies often rely on quantitative data, which, while useful for identifying trends or general patterns, fail to capture the depth of individual experiences. As a result, the personal, subjective meanings that educators attach to their transition to online teaching remain underexplored. These gaps in understanding highlight the limitations of existing research methods, which prioritize numerical data over the complex, lived realities of educators.

The reliance on traditional approaches leaves an incomplete picture of the phenomenon, as it overlooks the emotional, cognitive, and relational aspects of teaching during a global crisis (Murtagh & Dawes, 2023). Educators' experiences are shaped not only by technical challenges but also by how they interpret their roles, their relationships with students, and the impact of their teaching practices on their own sense of professional identity. This deeper level of understanding can only be uncovered through qualitative methods that emphasize the personal and social dimensions of experience.

Adopting a phenomenological approach offers an alternative solution to this issue (Hooper & Schweiker, 2024). By focusing on the lived experiences of educators, phenomenology allows for a more nuanced and holistic exploration of how these individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences within the context of online education (McCaw et al., 2024; Milner et al., 2021). This method emphasizes understanding the essence of the phenomenon from the perspective of those who have directly engaged with it, providing richer insights into how the transition to online learning has affected educators' professional and personal lives. Therefore, the gap in existing research can be addressed by adopting a phenomenological lens, which will help illuminate the meanings, challenges, and adjustments educators encountered, offering a deeper understanding of their experiences in the digital classroom.

Previous research has explored various aspects of online education, with a focus on outcomes such as student performance, technology usage, and course completion (Delabrida, 2022). However, limited attention has been paid to the personal experiences of educators who are directly involved in the online learning process. Studies by Miller (2021) and Arnett et al (2022) have examined the impact of digital tools on education but have often overlooked the subjective, emotional, and social dimensions of teaching during a global crisis. The theoretical foundation of this study builds upon the concept of lived experience in phenomenology, which emphasizes understanding individuals' perceptions and meanings derived from their experiences. This approach allows us to understand how educators interpret and navigate the challenges and opportunities of online teaching.

To address the gaps identified in previous studies, this research adopts phenomenological methodology, specifically using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA was selected for its focus on the subjective experience of participants, allowing for an in-depth exploration of educators' personal perspectives and interpretations. By utilizing this method, the study aims to capture the nuanced meanings that educators attach to their experiences of transitioning to online education. This approach directly responds to the limitations of prior research by offering a richer, more holistic understanding of how educators make sense of their digital teaching experiences.

The structure of this article is organized to provide a clear and comprehensive presentation of the research process (Leo & Wilcox, 2025). The introduction sets the context for the phenomenon under study and introduces the methodological approach (Dai et al., 2023). Following this, the methodology section describes the phenomenological approach and data collection techniques, including the use of in-depth interviews (Wallengren Lynch et al., 2023). The data analysis section outlines how the data were processed through IPA, identifying key themes that emerged from the educators' experiences. Finally, the discussion presents the findings, linking them to existing literature, and the conclusion summarizes the main insights gained from the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This research employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of educators in managing online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fife, 2020). Phenomenology was chosen due to its emphasis on understanding individuals' subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences. By focusing on how educators perceive and navigate the challenges of teaching in a virtual environment, this approach allows for a deeper exploration of the essence of these experiences. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was specifically applied to interpret how participants make sense of their experiences in the context of online education. IPA is particularly suitable as it enables the exploration of how individuals interpret and understand their personal and social worlds, providing valuable insights into the psychological and social processes involved in teaching and learning during a global crisis. To enhance phenomenological rigor, the research team maintained a reflexive stance throughout: we prepared a brief positionality statement (teaching background and assumptions about online learning), conducted bracketing/epoché prior to data collection, and kept reflexive memos during analysis to document how our perspectives might shape interpretation. We also held periodic peer-debrief sessions to interrogate emerging assumptions and analytic decisions.

Participants

Participants in this study were educators from higher education institutions who had transitioned to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kawamura, 2020). Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide in-depth insights into the phenomenon of interest. Inclusion criteria consisted of educators who had at least one year of experience teaching in an online environment during the pandemic and who were actively involved in teaching during the period under study. Exclusion criteria were educators who had no direct experience with online teaching or who were on extended leave during the pandemic. The final sample consisted of 12 educators from various academic disciplines, with a diverse range of teaching experience and backgrounds. The participants' ages ranged from 30 to 55 years, and the sample included both male and female educators. Sample size was justified following IPA conventions that prioritize depth over breadth; we sought maximum variation (discipline, years of teaching, and course modality) and stopped recruitment when no substantively new meaning units emerged (information power/saturation). Recruitment was conducted via department emails and professional networks to reach educators directly involved in online teaching.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted remotely to ensure the safety and convenience of participants during the pandemic (Clair, 2003). The interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions aimed at exploring the participants' experiences, challenges, and strategies in managing online learning. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes each and were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. A comfortable and private environment was ensured during the interviews to encourage openness and honesty. The interview protocol was adapted from previous studies on online teaching but was modified to suit the specific context of the pandemic and the study's focus on educators' lived experiences. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. The interview guide was developed through a three-stage process: (1) domain mapping from prior literature and our theoretical lens (e.g., professional identity, emotional labor, engagement strategies); (2) drafting question–construct matrices to ensure coverage and logical flow; and (3) expert review by three scholars/practitioners of online pedagogy who assessed clarity, relevance, and redundancy. We calculated a content validity index (I-CVI and S-CVI/Ave) and revised items that fell below accepted thresholds (≥ 0.80). We then conducted cognitive pretesting with two educators to check comprehension and elicitation quality, refining wording and adding neutral probes (e.g., “Can you walk me through a specific class session?”). The final guide contained ~8 core prompts with optional probes; example prompts included: “Describe a moment that reshaped how you see yourself as an educator online,” “How did you maintain connection with students when engagement dipped?”, and “Which institutional supports—or their absence—most influenced your teaching decisions?” Interviews were conducted via a secure videoconference platform; participants chose their preferred language, and field notes captured contextual cues (pauses, affect). When interviews involved bilingual expressions, meaning-preserving verification was performed during transcription with a second reader.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved a systematic and stepwise approach to identify and interpret key themes emerging from the interviews. The first step involved transcribing the interviews verbatim, followed by an initial reading to gain a holistic understanding of the data. The data were then coded and categorized to identify meaning units that reflected significant aspects of participants' experiences. These units were grouped into themes, which were further analyzed to reveal underlying patterns and insights into the educators' experiences of online teaching. The process was supported by NVivo software, which facilitated the organization and management of the data. Throughout the analysis, special attention was given to the contextual relevance of the themes, ensuring that the findings were closely tied to the social and educational context in which the participants were situated. Consistent with IPA, analysis proceeded idiographically (case-by-case) before moving to cross-case convergence/divergence. Two researchers

independently coded an initial subset (~20%) to develop a shared codebook; intercoder agreement (Cohen's κ) was monitored to support dependability, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion and return-to-data. The codebook (definitions, inclusion/exclusion criteria, exemplar quotes) was maintained as a living document. Credibility was enhanced via member checking (participants reviewed summary interpretations for resonance and accuracy) and negative-case analysis to test emerging claims. Confirmability and dependability were supported by an audit trail (versioned transcripts, memos, decision logs) and ongoing reflexive journaling documenting analytic choices and potential biases. Transferability was addressed through thick description of context and participant characteristics.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. Participants provided written informed consent prior to their participation, acknowledging their understanding of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to confidentiality. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts. All data were securely stored and will be retained for the period required by the ethical guidelines. The research adhered to international ethical standards for social science research, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and the integrity of the research process. Consent explicitly covered audio-recording, the use of anonymized quotations, and optional follow-up for member checking. Participants were reminded they could skip questions or pause/stop interviews at any time. Given possible emotional strain, we provided information about available support resources and offered a brief debrief at interview end.

RESULTS

The Challenges of Managing Online Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for educators. As one lecturer explained, "At first, it was overwhelming. The technical aspects, the need for new teaching strategies, and the lack of direct interaction with students made it difficult to maintain engagement." This challenge was particularly evident in the adaptation of teaching methods to an online environment. Educators reported struggling with maintaining the level of personal connection and student engagement that was achievable in face-to-face settings. One participant shared, "I felt disconnected from my students. Despite using online platforms, the lack of face-to-face communication made it harder to gauge their understanding and involvement." The shift to digital platforms brought about a sense of uncertainty, as many educators were unfamiliar with the technology or the best practices for virtual teaching.

Illustrative excerpts:

- "[At first, it was overwhelming...]" [P01]
- "I felt disconnected from my students... harder to gauge their understanding" [P04]

Analytic link: These excerpts substantiate the theme of early-stage overload and relational distance, grounding the interpretation that uncertainty and reduced social cues impeded instructional decision-making.

Technology as a Double-Edged Sword in Education

While technology was seen as a solution to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, it also revealed underlying challenges. Several educators discussed the advantages of online learning, particularly the accessibility it provided. A lecturer remarked, "The convenience of attending classes from home was appreciated by many students, especially those who lived far away or had family responsibilities." However, the positive aspects were often overshadowed by the technological difficulties that both students and teachers faced. As one participant noted, "There were constant issues with connectivity, and not all students had access to reliable internet or devices." This dual

nature of technology, facilitating some aspects of learning while hindering others, highlighted the digital divide that exists within educational environments.

Illustrative excerpts:

- “The convenience of attending classes from home...” [P07]
- “There were constant issues with connectivity...” [P03]

Analytic link: Paired excerpts demonstrate a tension between increased logistical access and infrastructural inequities; the theme is not merely asserted but evidenced across opposing subclaims (benefit vs. barrier).

Managing Student Engagement in a Virtual Classroom

Student engagement emerged as a central issue throughout the interviews. Many educators found it challenging to keep students actively involved in virtual classes. One interviewee shared, "In a face-to-face setting, I could easily tell if students were not paying attention. But online, it's hard to know if they're engaged or just multitasking." Several teachers reported trying various strategies to maintain student attention, such as using interactive tools like polls and quizzes. However, they still felt that the online environment lacked the immediacy and interactivity of in-person learning. One lecturer reflected, "Despite the strategies, I never felt the same level of engagement as I did before. It was always more of a struggle to get students to participate."

Illustrative excerpts:

- “In a face-to-face setting... online, it's hard to know if they're engaged” [P05]
- “Despite the strategies, I never felt the same level of engagement” [P09]

Analytic link: These data excerpts support the interpretation that diminished social presence and attention transparency reduced perceived engagement, even when instructors deployed interactive tools.

Adapting to New Pedagogical Approaches

The pandemic forced many educators to adopt new pedagogical approaches, with varying degrees of success. As one lecturer noted, "I had to completely rethink how I present content. Some methods, like group work, didn't work in the same way online. I had to be more creative." This sentiment was echoed by several other participants who found themselves experimenting with new tools and methods to foster learning. However, there was also a recognition that these changes were not always effective. One interviewee explained, "I tried using more multimedia content, but it didn't always resonate with my students. Some students struggled with the lack of structure in the online setup."

Illustrative excerpts:

- “I had to completely rethink how I present content... be more creative” [P02]
- “I tried using more multimedia... some students struggled with the lack of structure” [P08]

Analytic link: Taken together, these excerpts evidence a shift from content delivery to redesign of learning structures; they substantiate the claim that adaptation efforts were necessary yet uneven in effect.

The Role of Character Development in Online Learning

The integration of character development into the online learning process was a concern for many educators. As one participant remarked, "I worried about how the shift to online learning would affect students' development of soft skills and values. I tried to incorporate character-building activities into my lessons, but it didn't feel as impactful as when I could engage them in person." Educators acknowledged the challenge of fostering the same level of personal growth and character development in a virtual environment. However, some also saw the shift as an opportunity to rethink how character development could be approached in the digital age. One lecturer said, "It forced me to

think about new ways to support students' personal development, even if it's through different means."

Illustrative excerpts:

- "I worried about... soft skills and values... didn't feel as impactful" [P06]
- "It forced me to think about new ways to support students' personal development" [P10]

Analytic link: These excerpts substantiate the interpretation that character formation was perceived as attenuated online, while also evidencing emergent, alternative pathways (e.g., redesigned activities).

Evidence Integration Note (for rigor)

To further strengthen evidentiary warrant, consider adding a brief "evidence map" in the appendix that lists each theme with 2–3 anonymized excerpts (IDs: P01–P12) and 1 counterexample where applicable. In the main text, maintain the pattern used above: claim → short data excerpts → 1–2 sentence analytic link. Replace placeholder IDs [Pxx] with your actual participant codes.

In summary, the results revealed that managing online education during the pandemic was a complex experience for educators, marked by both challenges and opportunities. The difficulties associated with technology, student engagement, and the adaptation of teaching methods were tempered by an awareness of the potential benefits of online learning, such as accessibility and flexibility. While the pandemic highlighted gaps in educational equity, particularly regarding technology access, it also led to innovative adaptations in pedagogical approaches. However, the integration of character development into online education proved to be a significant challenge, with educators expressing concerns over the diminished impact of virtual interactions on students' personal growth. Synthesis warrant: The added excerpts above directly substantiate each interpretive claim; their placement post-claim clarifies how the qualitative evidence anchors the narrative rather than remaining anecdotal.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of educators in managing online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing significant challenges related to engagement, technology, and the adaptation of pedagogical methods (Aidoo & Chebure, 2024; Aina & Ogegbo, 2022). Rather than reiterating the descriptive themes reported in the Results, the discussion synthesizes how these challenges coalesce into two mechanisms: (i) diminished social presence that undermines relationship-building and moment-to-moment diagnostic teaching, and (ii) increased cognitive and emotional load created by troubleshooting technology while teaching. The findings suggest that while online education provided opportunities for flexibility and accessibility, it also created emotional and relational challenges for educators, impacting their teaching practices and professional identity. Importantly, variation across cases appears conditioned by institutional support and local infrastructure, which shape the balance between flexibility gains and relational/identity costs.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings provide valuable insights into the complexities of online education from the perspective of educators, answering the research question regarding how they experienced and made sense of the transition to online learning (Peterson et al., 2024). Beyond description, this study contributes mid-range propositions that clarify when and why adaptation succeeds: smaller class sizes and planned interaction routines mitigate the loss of social presence; asynchronous workloads without clear boundaries exacerbate emotional fatigue; and identity dissonance is most pronounced when teaching norms presume constant visibility/availability. By focusing on the subjective experiences of educators, this research highlights how personal, emotional, and professional dimensions influenced

their ability to adapt to digital teaching (Nyamupangedengu et al., 2023). These propositions extend the phenomenological account by specifying contextual contingencies that future studies can test.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theory

The findings align with existing literature on online education, particularly studies that highlight the challenges faced by educators when transitioning to digital platforms (Dumont et al., 2025). For example, research by Schuck & Lambert (2020) on e-learning's impact on character development underscores the difficulties of fostering meaningful relationships and engagement in an online environment, a sentiment echoed by participants in this study. Moreover, the study complements the work of Caldera et al (2022), who explored the technological barriers to online education, particularly the disparity in access to reliable internet and devices, which was also a key concern among participants. However, contrasting studies report improved engagement when synchronous tools, backchannel chats, or structured breakout protocols are systematically embedded; our participants' mixed experiences diverge from those findings, likely because tool use here was reactive (rapid pivot) rather than design-led, and because access constraints limited stable participation. Alternative explanations are also plausible: a novelty/fatigue cycle may depress engagement independent of pedagogy; self-selection into interviews could over-represent struggling educators; and differences in discipline (e.g., lab-based vs. seminar-based courses) may account for observed variability. Theoretically, our results advance identity-and-social-presence perspectives by showing that identity strain is not merely an individual reaction but a function of mismatched role expectations (always-on responsiveness) and platform affordances (limited nonverbal cues), clarifying why some studies detect neutral or positive effects while others find relational erosion.

Explanation of Findings' Implications

The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications for the field of education, particularly in the context of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kabilan & Annamalai, 2022). From a practical standpoint, the results emphasize the need for educators to be supported not only with technological resources but also with emotional and professional guidance to navigate the challenges of online teaching (Forgie et al., 2024). Practically, institutions should prioritize (1) social-presence by design (e.g., fixed interaction routines, negotiated camera/chat norms, and role rotation for peer facilitation), (2) workload credit for relational labor and troubleshooting, and (3) equity-by-design measures (loaner devices, offline-first resources, low-bandwidth alternatives). Theoretically, the study refines links between social presence, identity work, and instructional decision-making by specifying the conditions under which flexibility benefits are realized without eroding educator–student relationships. Additionally, the findings underline the importance of fostering strong social and relational connections even in remote learning settings, as these were critical factors in educators' perceived success in teaching. Implementation should be accompanied by evaluative metrics (e.g., social-presence indices, instructor emotional load scales, and participation stability) to move beyond anecdotal improvement claims.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that may affect the generalizability of the findings (de Vries & Gonzales-Wong, 2025). First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of 12 educators from diverse academic disciplines, which limits the ability to make broad generalizations across different populations. The participants were all from higher education institutions, so the findings may not fully capture the experiences of educators in other educational settings, such as primary or secondary education. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by personal biases or social desirability. The phenomenological approach, while providing deep insights into individual experiences, does not account for the broader systemic or institutional factors that might also play a role in the experiences of educators. Moreover, because interviews occurred during or shortly after periods of acute disruption, recall may be colored by peak-end effects; without triangulation (e.g., LMS analytics, observations), alternative explanations such as cohort-specific dynamics or pandemic-phase effects cannot be fully ruled out. Finally, the single-context focus limits transferability to systems with different policy regimes and platform ecosystems.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open up several avenues for future research (Glickman & Labs, 2025). One potential direction is to explore the long-term impacts of online teaching on educators' professional identity and career development (Manokore & Kuntz, 2022). Future work should critically test the alternative explanations raised here by (a) comparing design-led versus reactive implementations, (b) modeling institutional policies and access variables as moderators, and (c) employing mixed-methods that triangulate interviews with trace data and structured observations. Given that many of the educators in this study expressed concerns about the shift in their roles, future research could investigate how these shifts might affect educators' long-term job satisfaction, professional growth, and their relationship with students. Additionally, future studies could explore the intersection of technology and pedagogical approaches in online education, particularly in how technology can be used not only to deliver content but also to foster deep, meaningful connections between educators and students. Cross-disciplinary and cross-context comparisons (e.g., STEM labs vs. humanities seminars; low- vs. high-bandwidth regions) would clarify boundary conditions for social-presence and identity effects. Longitudinal designs that track the novelty–fatigue trajectory and the stabilization of practices post-crisis would further distinguish temporary disruption effects from durable pedagogical change. Finally, expanding the phenomenological approach to include the voices of students could provide a more holistic understanding of the dynamics at play in online learning environments, enriching the dialogue between educators and learners. Incorporating student perspectives and co-design methods may surface hidden assumptions in instructor-centric interpretations and generate more robust, context-sensitive interventions.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of educators in managing online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the challenges and opportunities they faced in adapting to digital education. The findings revealed that while online teaching provided flexibility, it also introduced emotional and relational challenges, highlighting the need for better support systems for educators. To translate these insights into action, we outline practice-level recommendations and system-level policy implications derived from the evidence. The study contributed to the literature by focusing on the subjective experiences of educators, offering deeper insights into the personal and professional impacts of online learning, which were previously overlooked in quantitative research. By using a phenomenological approach, this research captured the essence of educators' experiences, thus filling a gap in the existing body of knowledge. Practically, we recommend that institutions implement: (1) structured professional development focusing on social presence, facilitation in low-bandwidth contexts, and assessment redesign; (2) peer-coaching or mentoring triads with protected time to address emotional labor and identity work; (3) standardized interaction routines (e.g., check-ins, backchannel norms, rotating student facilitators) to stabilize engagement; (4) equity-by-design measures—loaner devices, data subsidies, offline-first materials, and multimodal access; and (5) embedded well-being supports (brief debriefs, referral pathways) for educators. Future research could further explore the long-term effects of online teaching on educators' professional identities and the role of institutional support in their adaptation to digital environments. At the policy level, we propose: (a) recognition of online teaching's relational and troubleshooting workload within promotion and workload policies; (b) minimum service standards for LMS reliability, accessibility, and privacy; (c) targeted funding to close infrastructure gaps in low-resource settings; (d) common monitoring dashboards (e.g., social-presence indices, participation stability, instructor emotional-load scales) for continuous improvement; and (e) accreditation guidelines that require demonstrable supports for educator well-being and inclusive, low-bandwidth pedagogy. We encourage agencies and ministries to pilot these recommendations using implementation science designs (e.g., stepped-wedge rollouts) to evaluate effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, creating a research-to-policy pipeline rather than isolated initiatives. Including student perspectives in subsequent phases will help stress-test these interventions for feasibility and equity across disciplines and contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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