



Theology Students' Views on the Communication with the 'Other' During COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract

During the academic year 2022-2023, the Schools of Theology at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and Paderborn University conducted field research among 60 students about whether they believed their communication skills with the 'others' had improved during the lockdown due to COVID-19. The participating students belonged to three Christian denominations (Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic) and were all pursuing degrees to become Religious Education teachers. They were asked to fill in a questionnaire, developed and used for the purposes of the study, that also encouraged them to become self-aware of their emotions while communicating with 'others'—individuals who, like themselves, were isolated in their homes. The results indicated that students' reflections on their communication with the 'others' varied, revealing different perspectives and insights. However, the prevailing emotion among students was that their communication skills did not improve during the lockdown period caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A majority of the students—approximately 65.64%—expressed solely negative viewpoints, suggesting that digital communication cannot adequately substitute for real, face-to-face interactions, and that the absence of interpersonal contact and social engagement has resulted in diminished quality of relationships. This was followed by a smaller proportion of students who articulated only positive arguments and emotions or presented a balanced view, incorporating both positive and negative aspects. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic also had some significant positive results in the transformation of human communication, revealing both challenges and opportunities across various Christian denominations.

Keywords

Emotional intelligence; Theology; COVID-19; pandemic; communication

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the way we connect with one another, forcing us to adapt to a new reality with limited physical communication. This abrupt shift to digital communication has been particularly challenging for students, especially those training to become Religious Education (RE) teachers, a role that requires strong interpersonal and communication skills. The psychological and social effects of the pandemic—like feelings of isolation and the disruption of traditional education—created a base for exploring how young people perceived their communication abilities during the pandemic, as lockdown measures changed dramatically, not only the educational habits but also the social lives of students. Universities worldwide had to quickly transition to online platforms, altering both academic and social landscapes. While technology offered a way to stay connected, it could never fully replicate the warmth and depth of

face-to-face interactions. Human beings have an inherent need for physical communication; our connections often thrive on non-verbal cues, shared experiences, and the emotional richness that comes with in-person interactions. Particularly, for Theology students, studying to become Religious Education teachers, who will teach about empathy, dialogue and communication with the other, the challenges of this period were stronger as, it is crucial for future Religious Education teachers to be able to connect with their students in meaningful connections with empathy and cultural sensitivity.

2. Emotional Intelligence in Decision Making

Our research question was grounded in Daniel Goleman's theory of Emotional Intelligence, which provides a new perspective on emotions. While emotion and cognition are often regarded as two distinct domains, with separate and frequently opposing roles in brain function, there is evidence that both can influence the behavioral attitude (Gray et al., 2002; Humphrey et al., 2007).

The rational brain and the emotional brain work together harmoniously, guiding individuals throughout their lives (Goleman, 2020). Typically, a balance exists between these two systems; the emotional brain informs the functions of the rational brain, while cognition enhances and occasionally obstructs the processing of emotions, thereby creating equilibrium between emotional experience and rational thought (Goleman, 2020).

The rational brain cannot operate effectively without being in sync with emotions; the limbic system, neocortex, amygdala, and prefrontal lobes complement and interact with one another, promoting both emotional intelligence and cognitive abilities (Goleman, 2020). This perspective reinforces the idea that emotion and cognition exist in a state of perfect balance (Angel, 2011).

Goleman identified five key domains: self-awareness, emotional control, individual motivation, empathy, and relationship management skills. He supported that these domains significantly influence learning, friendship (particularly via communication), and success in both professional and social contexts (Aubrey & Riley, 2022). Developing these skills, especially during adolescence in school, can establish habits that shape future behavior. Therefore, there is a strong link between educational experiences and the development of emotional and social skills (Liff, 2003).

According to Goleman, "There is a balance between the emotional and rational brain; emotion is feeding and informing the functions of the rational brain, and the rational brain is enhancing and sometimes preventing the inputs of emotions" (Goleman, 2020). Research has shown that neural networks are engaged in both cognition and emotion, but they function differently in each area (Azari et al., 2001).

Goleman suggested that his model of emotional intelligence is based on the ability to recognize one's emotions and to utilize this awareness in making decisions in life and forming behavioral attitudes. Recognizing an emotion when it arises is fundamental to emotional intelligence, as it contributes to emotional control, which is essential for self-regulation and creativity (e.g., self-awareness and self-control) while considering rational thought. This ability involves recognizing one's own emotions and using them to come up with final decisions (Goleman, 2020). It has to do with the ability to "manage successfully the unpleasant experiences and to control his/her impulses, to remain optimistic even during failures" (O'Neill, 1996).

For the planning of the question in our research, we related and connected Goleman's theory with the credition theory, which supports that emotions, cognition, and beliefs are in perfect balance (Angel, 2011).

In formulating the research question, we grounded our inquiry in an extensive theoretical framework that integrates Goleman's emotional intelligence theory (Goleman, 2020) with the credition theory proposed by Angel, Runehov, Oviedo, and Palutzian (2017). Goleman's theory emphasizes the vital role of emotional intelligence in decision-making processes, proposing that individuals who are adept at recognizing and managing their own emotions can enhance their cognitive performance and interpersonal relationships. This suggests that an individual's emotional awareness can significantly influence their reasoning, potentially altering their decisions to a more nuanced understanding of the circumstances involved (Goleman, 2020).

Taking these theories into account, we aimed to explore how self-awareness of emotions and ratio impacts the theology students' views. During our research, we encouraged participants to consciously reflect on their emotional responses while engaging in analytical reasoning. By fostering an environment where students could articulate their feelings alongside their rational arguments, we hoped to demonstrate that a heightened state of self-awareness contributes to greater self-consciousness and understanding of one's competencies. This dual approach not only promotes emotional regulation but also enhances the overall quality of decision-making, particularly in academic settings where cognitive engagement and emotional influence are both crucial (Mitropoulou et al., 2018).

3. The COVID-19 Situation

The corona pandemic meant a far-reaching change worldwide. It represents an event that has never occurred in history after World War II. Although newly emerged viruses repeatedly led to global spread (e.g., HIV or MERS), they did not have the pandemic effects as the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The consequences of COVID-19 are still being felt, especially in phenomena such as Long Covid. It was a crisis experience that affected everyone around the globe. After the virus spread to humans in autumn 2019, it spread extremely quickly, and so the WHO upgraded the disease to a pandemic in March 2020. A situation that was only reversed after three years. One of the measures taken to stop the spread was the lockdown, which affected large parts of life. This measure was carried out very differently in European countries. The loss of social contacts was quickly perceived as stressful (Gravelmann, 2022). Right down to the fact that the physical presence of another person was perceived as a threat.

In Germany, the first lockdown began from January to March 2020, followed by another in December 2020, which was relaxed again in April 2021 (Renz, 2022). There were also two lockdowns in Greece, and developments in both countries were largely parallel. Not only were schools closed and switched to digital teaching, but also universities. Digital teaching began in the summer semester of 2020, which became a major challenge for teachers and students. The situation was stressful for the students in several ways. The jobs in cafes, bars, cinemas, etc., with which they financed their studies disappeared overnight (Gravelmann, 2022). Dorothea Wagner describes the consequences as follows: “The universities had to change their entire range of courses within a few weeks. The first digital semester was a large-scale field trial. The pace of change at universities was enormous, and there was a lot of tolerance on the part of students towards the inevitable teething problems of ad hoc digital courses. In general, during the crisis phase, there was a lot of willingness to improvise and a certain tolerance for mistakes and rule violations. But it also quickly became clear how important being present at universities is—for the exchange between the different groups, the scientific discourse, the integration, for learning together and getting to know each other” (Wagner, 2020, p. 237). The location changed at the school of learning from the classroom to home (Gravelmann, 2022). Regarding the switch to distance learning at universities, Reinhold Gravelmann states: “The problems with the technical equipment were fewer than at school, and students also quickly became familiar with the digital formats. But as with the students, many students also had difficulty with this form of learning (alone) at home in front of the computer screen. Overall, however, the digital studies were largely satisfactory, although good didactic preparation proved to be the main problem” (Gravelmann, 2022). For several semesters, student life took place exclusively from home (Renz, 2022). Nevertheless, loneliness was a big problem in university work, which students found difficult (cf. Gravelmann, 2022).

Scientific research also reacted quickly to the pandemic, and empirical surveys have now been carried out on the situation and the consequences for students. The studies make it clear that young people from precarious living conditions faced severe disadvantages (Gravelmann, 2022). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA study), published in spring 2024, clearly shows how the pandemic has affected student performance worldwide. The PISA results for both Greece (OECD, 2024a) and Germany (OECD, 2024b) show a significant drop in performance.

With regard to the first period of lockdown, Ute Frevert (2020) speaks of three feelings that were central for people: fear, solidarity, and trust (Frevert, 2020). The fundamental uncertainty of human life is reflected in the feeling of fear that many people had about the other that was invading their lives: COVID-19. Especially since it was not clear how bad the SARS-CoV-2 virus would really be and which mutations it would still undergo. However, great solidarity could also be felt, with people, for example, who behave appropriately towards vulnerable groups. At the same time, there is also great trust in the government's measures and the expertise of scientists (Frevert, 2020). Social psychology has described three basic needs that are important for human life (Mackie & Smith, 2014). First, it is about maintaining control (mastery). This need was fundamentally shaken by the pandemic, as the virus was difficult for individuals, states, and societies to get under control. The need for community (connectedness) could also be maintained in this special situation. Protective measures, including lockdown, prevented people from coming into contact with other people. But the need for validation (valuing me and mine) was also affected. Digital formats, in particular, tended to lead to insecurity about one's own self (Schambeck, 2023).

4. Aim of the Research

The aim of our research was to investigate the metacognitive awareness of the emotions experienced by students of Religion during the COVID-19 lockdown when our daily interactions were transformed, rendering all individuals ‘others’ in a shared experience of seclusion within their homes. We sought to assess the level of self-awareness these students had, regarding their emotional status (with regard to their reasoning), because of the challenges posed by isolation and the

absence of direct communication with others.

In this context, our research endeavors to identify the specific emotions students experienced during this period, examining how these emotions correlate with their religious beliefs and denominations. We are particularly interested in understanding how their denominational backgrounds may have influenced their emotional expressions, especially in terms of optimistic versus pessimistic outlooks. By analyzing the spectrum of both positive and negative emotions, we aim to explore the underlying justifications and arguments these students articulated, as well as the relative strength of these emotions in terms of intensity.

Ultimately, this study seeks to illuminate the intricate relationship between religious identity and emotional response during a time of global crisis, providing valuable insights into the adaptive strategies and coping mechanisms that may have emerged from their unique experiences of communication—or lack thereof—with others. Through this research, we hope to contribute to a richer understanding of the psychological and emotional dimensions of religious background in times of crisis.

5. Research Design and Procedure

5.1 Sample & Sampling Technique

This exploratory research took place in the 2022-2023 academic year and assessed 60 University students from Paderborn University and Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The Paderborn University students were studying at the School of Protestant Theology and the School of Catholic Theology. The Aristotle University students were studying at the School of Theology. The mean age of all participant students was 23.60 ± 4.09 years. The students who participated belonged to three denominations (orthodox, protestant, and catholic) and they were all studying to become Religious Education (RE) teachers (Figure 1).

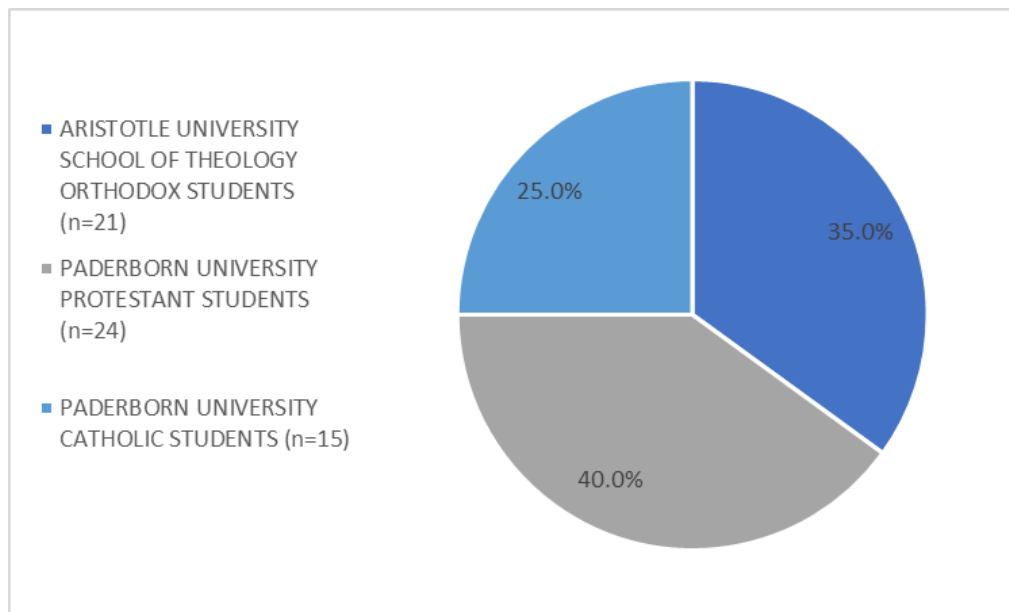


Figure 1. Distribution of students by university and denomination.

Specifically, of the 60 participants, 21 students (13 female, 8 male) were from the Aristotle University School of Theology-orthodox, 24 students (19 female, 4 male, 1 diverse) from the Protestant School of Paderborn University and 15 students (13 female, 2 male) from the Catholic School of Paderborn University (Figure 2).

All University students were asked for their personal consent to participate in the research process. The primary data collection was based on the non-probability purposeful sampling technique by selecting the respondents that best fitted the objectives and purposes of the study to acquire an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under exploration. The qualitative nature of the analysis and the intention to include homogeneous groups of university students with a particular background indicated that a relatively small sample size is acceptable while taking into consideration the limitation of not being able to generalize (Etikan, 2016; Frey, 2018; Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011).

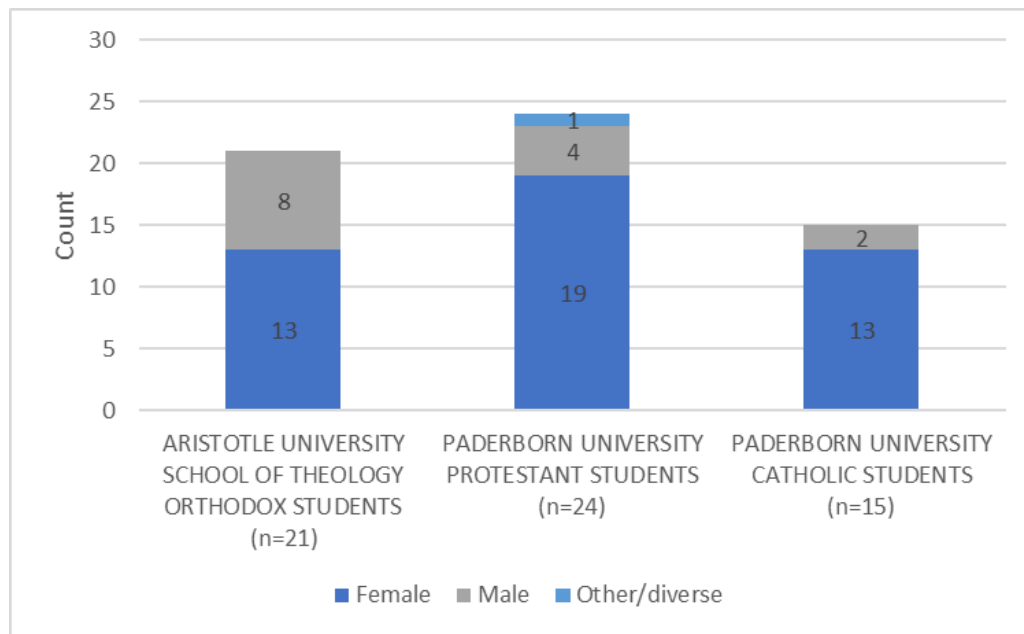


Figure 2. Distribution of students by gender and university.

5.2 Research Tool

A participation sheet was developed and used to investigate the reflections of the students' self-awareness on their communication skills with the 'others' during the Covid-19 lockdown in their homes. Students from three different denominations (orthodox, protestant, and catholic) and two universities (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and Paderborn University) were asked to reflect and to fill in the participation sheet, which consisted of two sections. First, the students were asked to accept (answer YES) or reject (answer NO) the statement: "During the lockdown due to COVID-19, my skills in communication with the 'others' were improved". Following this initial closed question, the first section required participants to provide three arguments supporting their decision. The second section asked them to identify three emotions they experienced while formulating their arguments. With the intention to facilitate the students' identification of their emotions, they were provided with several emotion nouns, such as love, joy, sorrow, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, dispute, shame, guilt, embarrassment, pleasure, enjoyment, and self-confidence. However, students could state any other emotions they felt that were not included in the list.

Except for the initial closed question (acceptance or rejection of the statement), all sections and questions on the worksheet were open-ended, allowing participants to freely express their views and emotions (Zafeiropoulos, 2005). This open-ended format offers several advantages, such as flexibility, because the participants are not restricted in their responses, depth of exploration. The researcher can delve deeper into the participants' perspectives, collaboration, and interaction as it encourages a collaborative relationship between the researcher and the participants and unanticipated insights because it allows for the discovery of unexpected answers (Robson, 2002).

5.3 Statistical Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative analysis were used (Javeau, 2000; Robson, 2002). Descriptive statistical analysis was used to calculate and present basic characteristics of the sample as well as to describe the answers given in the participation sheet used as the basic research tool (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001).

Emotions stated by the students were categorized based on positive and negative emotions' classifications (Parrott, 2001; Plutchik, 2001; Robinson, 2009). Chi-square test was applied to identify significant differences between the groups (University schools) in the case of categorical variables. The confidence level of 95% was set in all statistical tests performed. SPSS and Microsoft Excel 365 spreadsheets were used for data analysis.

5.4 Results

Out of a total of 60 students surveyed, 14 reported that they experienced an enhancement in their communication skills

during the lockdown period. In contrast, the majority, that is 46 students, expressed the belief that their communication abilities had not improved (Figure 3).

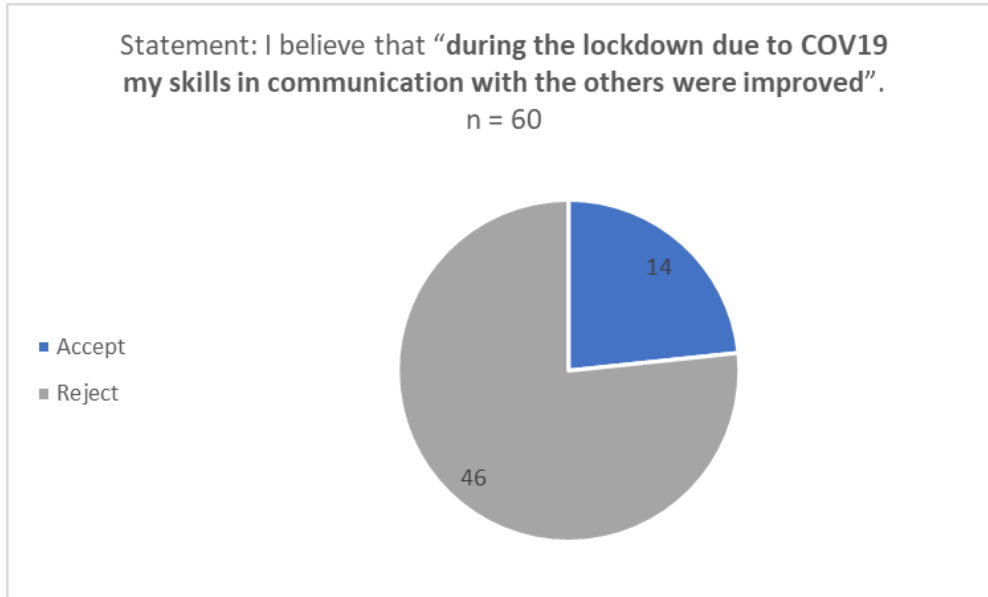


Figure 3. Distribution of students accepting or rejecting the statement about communication with the ‘others’ during the COVID-19 lockdown.

At Aristotle University School of Theology, 19% of the students, at the Protestant School of Paderborn University, 25% of the students, and at the Catholic School of Paderborn University, 26.7% of the students stated that their communication skills with others were improved. Conversely, the majority of students, 81%, 75%, and 73.3%, respectively, disagreed with this assertion (Figure 4).

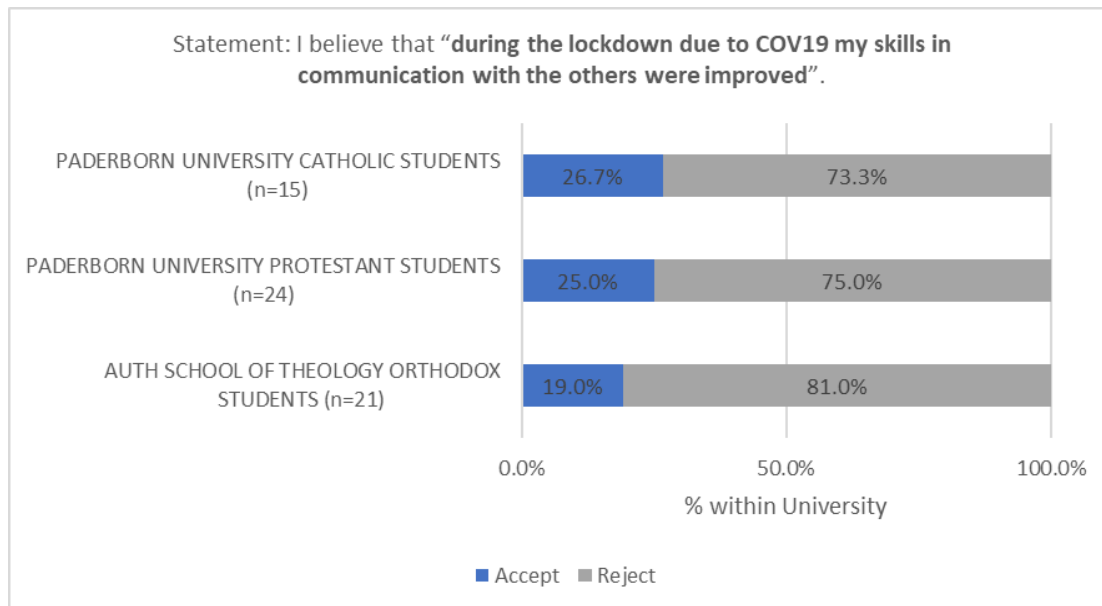


Figure 4. Distribution of students and denominations accepting or rejecting the statement about communication with the ‘others’ during the COVID-19 lockdown.

In relation to the first emotion identified, it was observed that most of the students experienced negative emotions regarding their communication with others during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, the students from the Catholic

School of Paderborn University exhibited the highest percentage of positive emotions, reaching 40%. This contrasted with the students in the Protestant School of Paderborn University, who reported a positive emotion rate of 29.2%, and those in the Aristotle University School of Theology, where the figure was only 19% (Figure 5). No statistically significant difference was found between the different University schools regarding the first emotion positive/negative ratio ($\alpha = 0.05$).

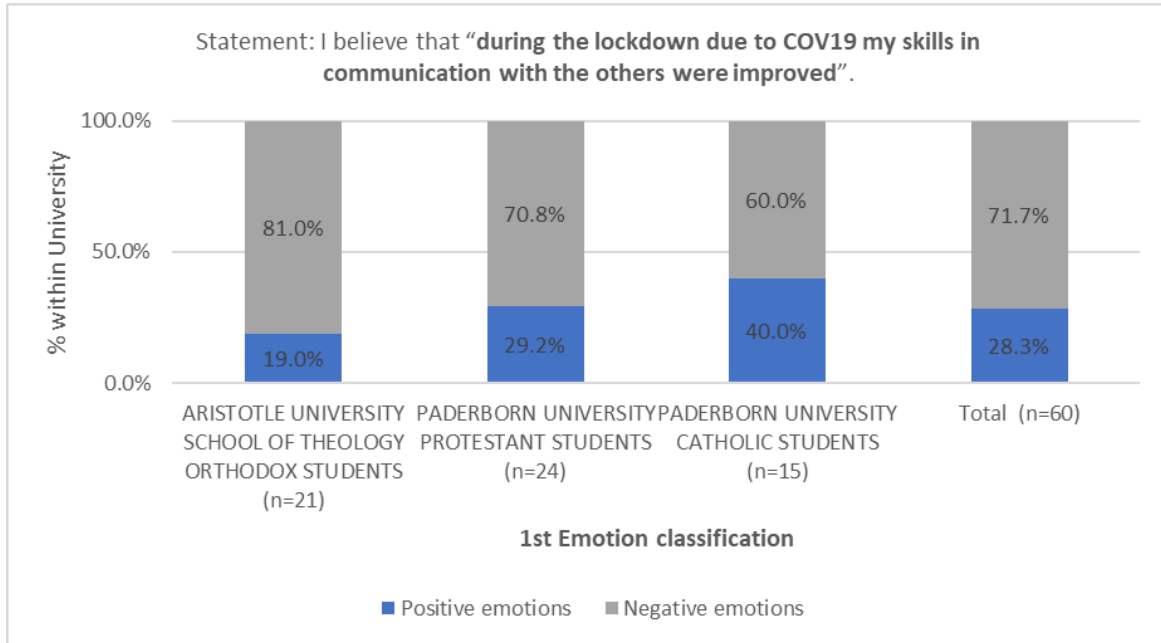


Figure 5. First emotion categorization in total and between university schools.

The analysis of the second emotion examined revealed that the Catholic School of Paderborn University students had statistically significant higher percentage of positive emotions (53.3%) ($\chi^2=6.217, p=0.045$) compared with the Protestant School of Paderborn University (33.3%) and Aristotle University School of Theology (14.3%) (Figure 6).

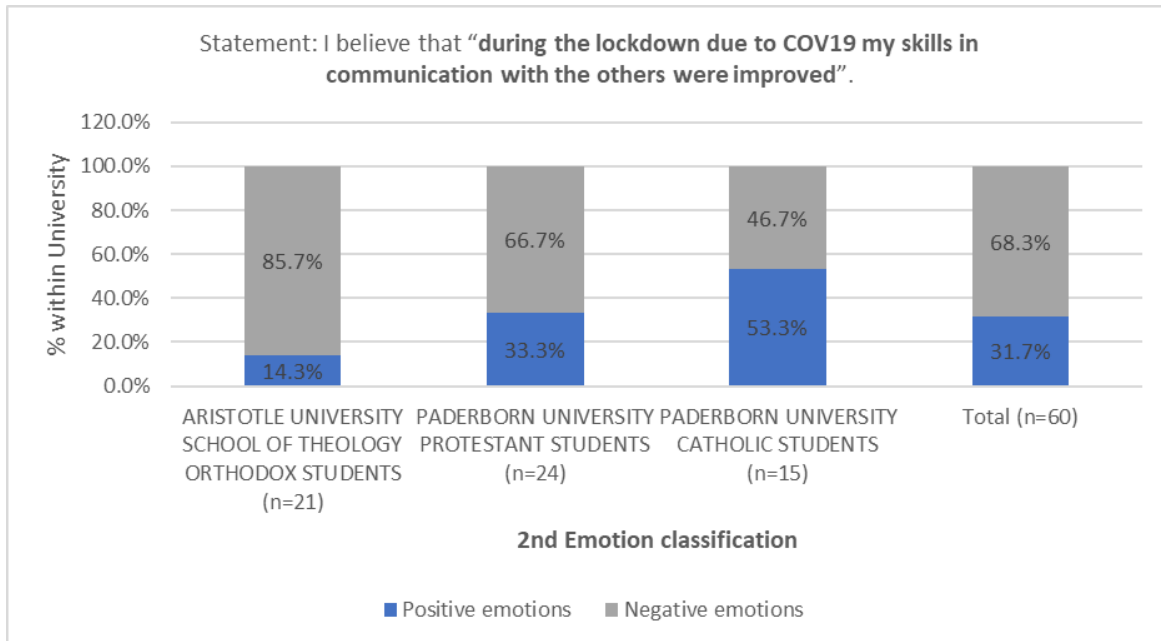


Figure 6. Second emotion categorization in total and between university schools.

Finally, the findings for the third emotion analyzed, indicated that the students from the Catholic School of Paderborn University exhibited a statistically significant higher percentage of positive emotions (61.5%) ($\chi^2= 6.029, p=0.049$) compared with the Protestant School of Paderborn University (25%) and Aristotle University School of Theology (25%) (Figure 7).

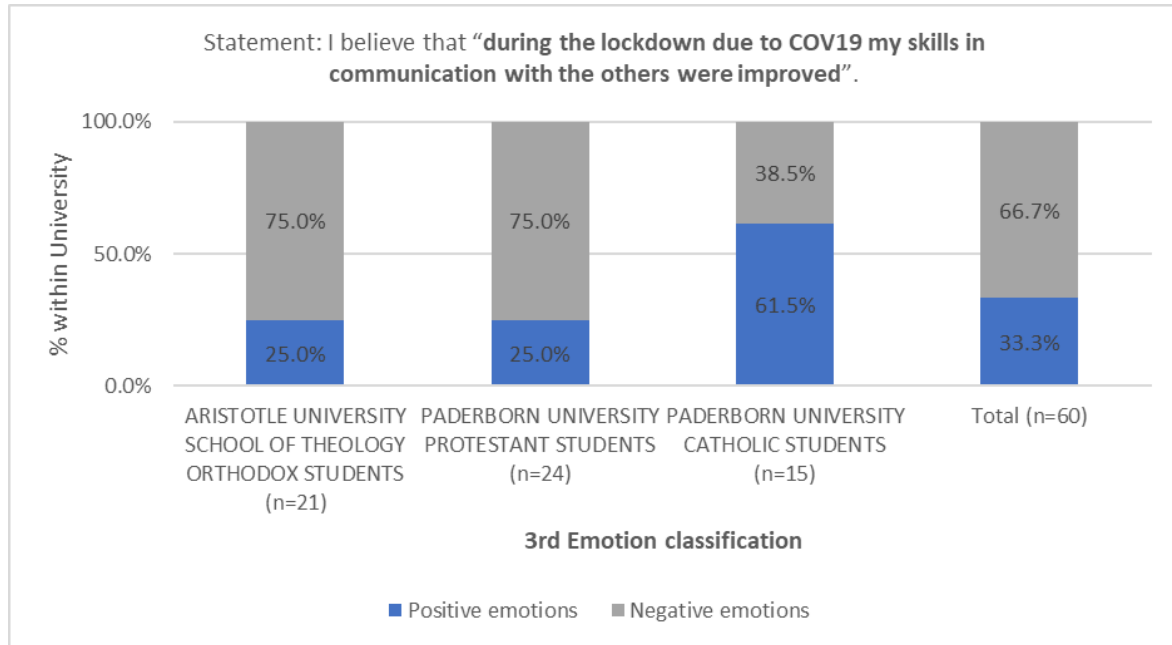


Figure 7. Third emotion categorization in total and between university schools.

The emotions stated first by the students in the Catholic School of Theology of Paderborn university were: confidence by 4 students, grief by 3, frustration, dislike and fear by 1 for each of them; those stated by the students in the Protestant School of Theology in Paderborn University were: confidence by 4 students, frustration, grief, dislike and fear by 2 students each, and embarrassment by 1 student. The emotions stated by the students in the School of Theology in Aristotle University were: sorrow by 5 students, frustration by 3, embarrassment by 2, and grief and fear by 1 student each (Table 1).

Table 1. First emotion frequency

1st Emotion	AUTH	PADERBORN UNIVERSITY PROTESTANT	PADERBORN UNIVERSITY CATHOLIC	Total
	Number of students			
confidence	0	4	4	8
frustration	3	2	1	6
grief	1	2	3	6
sorrow	5	0	0	5
embarrassment	2	1	1	4
dislike	0	2	1	3
fear	1	2	0	3

The first emotion was stated once or twice by a total of 60 students

joy, loneliness, self-knowledge, surprise, anger, confusion, curiosity, depression, disgust, dispute, fatigue, guilt, hatred, indifference, lethargy, pain, pride, shame, stress, uncertainty

The emotions stated second by the students in the Catholic School of Theology of Paderborn university were: self-knowledge by 3 students, frustration by 3, anger and agitation by 1 for each of them; those stated by the students in the Protestant School of Theology in Paderborn University were: frustration by 4 students, loneliness by 3, self-knowledge and fatigue by 2 each, and, anger and agitation by 1 student each. The emotions stated by the students in the School of Theology in Aristotle University were: sorrow by 5 students, frustration, anger, and fatigue by 2 each, and agitation by 1 student (Table 2).

Table 2. Second Emotion frequency

	AUTH	PADERBORN UNIVERSITY PROTESTANT	PADERBORN UNIVERSITY CATHOLIC	Total
2nd Emotion	Number of students			
frustration	2	4	2	8
self-knowledge	0	2	3	5
sorrow	5	0	0	5
anger	2	1	1	4
fatigue	2	2	0	4
agitation	1	1	1	3
loneliness	0	3	0	3

The second emotion was stated once or twice by a total of 60 students

confidence, embarrassment, fear, grief, indifference, joy, uncertainty, understanding, ambivalence, curiosity, dispute, empathy, excitement, hated, hope, organized, regret, relief, self-confidence, surprise

The third emotions stated by students in the Catholic School of Theology of Paderborn university were: self-knowledge and empathy by 4 students, and, frustration, fatigue, fear by 3 students, while 2 students did not state a third emotion; those stated by the students in the Protestant School of Theology in Paderborn University were: frustration and agitation by 2 students each, and, fatigue, fear, empathy, and self-knowledge by 1 student each. However, the emotions stated by the students in the School of Theology in Aristotle University were: frustration by 5 students, fatigue by 4, fear by 1, while 1 student did not state a third emotion (Table 3).

Table 3. Third emotion frequency

	AUTH	PADERBORN UNIVERSITY PROTESTANT	PADERBORN UNIVERSITY CATHOLIC	Total
3rd Emotion	Number of students			
frustration	5	2	1	8
fatigue	4	1	1	6
fear	2	1	1	4
No answer	1	0	2	3
empathy	0	1	2	3
self-knowledge	0	1	2	3

The third emotion was stated once or twice by a total of 60 students

agitation, confusion, curiosity, dislike, grief, pain, pleasure, relief, surprise, anger, annoyance, being mocked, connected, embarrassment, fatigue, helpless, joy, joy/love, knowledge in general, lack of motivation, love, sadness, malice, shame

5.5 Students' Argumentation

The analysis of students' arguments led to the development of three distinct categories based on the nature of their contributions: 1. Exclusively negative arguments, 2. Exclusively positive arguments, and 3. A blend of both negative and positive arguments. A majority of the students—approximately 65.64%—expressed solely negative viewpoints, suggesting a predominantly critical perspective among this group. This was followed by a smaller segment of students who articulated only positive arguments, accounting for 21.14% of the responses. Finally, 13.22% of the students presented a balanced view, incorporating both positive and negative aspects. These findings highlight not only the general sentiment among the students but also emphasize the importance of encouraging a more nuanced discourse that allows for a range of perspectives. By understanding the distribution of these views, we can better address the underlying factors that lead to predominantly negative assertions and explore ways to cultivate a more constructive discussion among students (Figure 8).

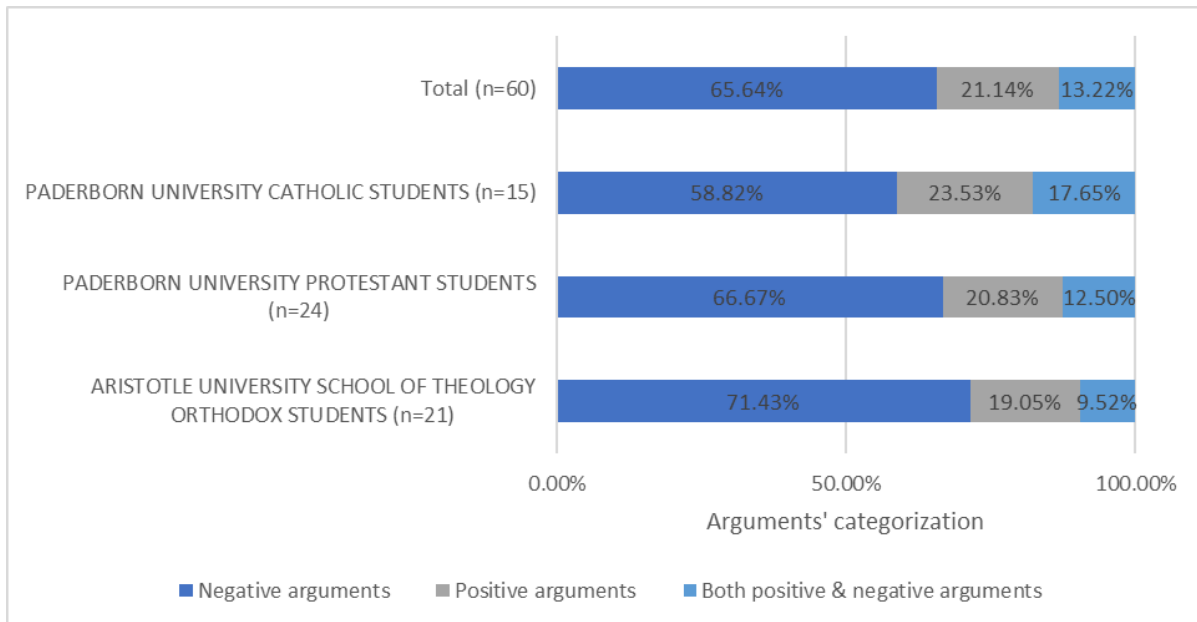


Figure 8. Categories of students' argument combinations.

Most students stated that digital communication cannot adequately substitute for real, face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, they argued that the absence of interpersonal contact and social engagement has resulted in diminished quality of relationships. Considering these circumstances, it seems that the prevailing emotion among students was that their communication skills did not improve during the lockdown period caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the impact of recent shifts toward digital communication, which were enhanced during the lockdown pandemic, seems to profoundly influence the interpersonal contact and the social interactions among students, revealing significant challenges and transformations in their relational dynamics during this period. Some Protestant students reported a sharp decline in their social interactions, signaling a notable reduction in contact with peers. As they noted, they experienced “Fewer social contacts”, “Significantly reduced contact with other people”, and “Less cooperation with others”. Several shared their feelings of alienation, describing experiences of anonymity, loneliness, and isolation, e.g., “No exchange with fellow students”, “We did not share all of our feelings because we thought that our feelings weren’t as bad as some fates in connection with COVID-19”. This decline in interaction prompted a newfound awareness of the importance of face-to-face communication. As one student reflected, “I learned to appreciate being able to talk to others”, highlighting a crucial realization about the value of interpersonal relationships that had previously gone unrecognized.

Several Greek Orthodox students from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki highlighted their initial negative emotional responses in their arguments. One expressed, “We experienced feelings of shame and fear, which made us hesitant to engage with others”. Another stated, “I was not happy and as a result I did not want to interact and communicate with others”. Additionally, a student noted the emotional disconnect prevalent during this period: “The people ‘forgot’ how to express their emotions and lost their communication”. Acknowledging the impact of the COVID-19 situation, another

student revealed, “My disappointment for the whole situation of COVID-19 made me keep distance from certain persons”.

Relatively, several Catholic students voiced their struggles with technology, stating they preferred in-person conversations due to the lack of motivation to engage through digital means, as noted by a student: “I prefer to speak in person, because in the digital age there is no motivation or desire to communicate via media” or “Seminars and lectures were difficult to follow digitally (needed more effort)”. One student articulated the lasting impact of lockdown measures, claiming, “My communication skills have deteriorated due to the limited social contact”, leading to diminished self-confidence. This sentiment highlighted a pervasive sense of loss, as many experienced a drop in their communication competency, attributed to the shift to online learning environments.

The evolution of communication during the digital age raises important questions about the role of language and face-to-face interaction, particularly in the context of educational experiences. An examination of the perspectives shared by students across different faith backgrounds reveals several themes regarding the impact of digital communication on their verbal abilities and communication skills. The assessment revealed intriguing insights regarding verbal communication skills and the process of learning foreign languages. A Protestant student remarked, “I used language less frequently; especially, it affected foreign languages”. Another added, “The lack of personal contact hindered my ability to enhance my verbal communication skills.” A third student shared, “My only conversation partner was Alexa,” illustrating the isolation some students experienced in developing their language abilities.

The limitations of online teaching were a common refrain, with many students noting that virtual platforms facilitated minimal, if any, meaningful exchanges. The consensus was that tools like Zoom did not enhance their educational experience or foster genuine collaboration with classmates. One student remarked, “Less collaborative work and cooperation with others diminished our learning”. Additionally, many expressed difficulties in initiating conversations or approaching others, indicating that the barrier created by digital communication made social interactions feel more daunting. Ultimately, some felt that digital communication tools like Zoom hindered rather than helped their ability to engage effectively, as one student notes: “Zoom didn’t exactly promote my ability to communicate”. Others reported that distance education and the impersonal nature of digital contact rendered their communication efforts largely ineffective, e.g., “The distance teaching and the impersonal contact rendered useless such skills.”, “Digital contact does not equate to personal contact”. Students also reported feeling that the richness of dialogue, which thrives on context and elaboration, suffers in a digital environment where brevity often takes precedence: “Because of digital communication, communication has deteriorated due to abbreviations”. Moreover, the reduction in experiential learning during this period has led to fewer discussion topics, resulting in more superficial conversations. With less opportunity for shared experiences—such as collaborative projects or social gatherings—students felt that their dialogues were limited and less engaging. As one stated: “Fewer topics because I had less experience”.

Finally, some students articulated a specific aspect of digital communication that heightened their anxiety—namely, the “protection” afforded by the shut camera during online interactions. This barrier fostered a false sense of security that, paradoxically, contributed to their fear of expressing genuine opinions. Students noted that the anonymity of the camera-off feature made it easier to disengage, but it also hindered their ability to connect authentically with peers. One noted: “I had the “protection” of the shut camera which enhanced my fear to express my opinion”. The lack of visual cues and immediate feedback that comes with in-person dialogue further intensified their apprehension about sharing thoughts and feelings openly, leading to a reluctance to participate in discussions.

While the discussion primarily focused on negative experiences, there were also glimpses of positive perspectives regarding communication with others during the lockdown triggered by COVID-19. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic also had some significant positive results in the transformation of human communication, revealing both challenges and opportunities across various Christian denominations. Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox students have all embraced new forms of communication, each bringing their unique perspectives and experiences to the forefront.

The Protestant students noted the emergence of new communication channels such as Zoom and Big Blue Button (BBB) as pivotal during the pandemic and developed familiarity with those video-meeting platforms, enhancing their overall connectivity. They found that communicating over the phone often proved easier than written correspondence, leading to a newfound appreciation for audio-based engagement. Thus, some students mentioned their engagement with podcasts and audiobooks during the lockdown, which likely enriched their communication skills and broadened their knowledge base. As they stated: “Communicating over the phone is easier than in writing.”, “I listened to a lot of podcasts, audiobooks during lockdown, which must have had an impact on my communication”. They also reported improvements in collaborative digital work, such as creating joint PowerPoint presentations. Importantly, they recognized that contact could be maintained without the necessity of daily meetings, emphasizing the quality of interactions over quantity, e.g., “Better to have email contact with others. You don’t have to meet daily to keep contact”.

The Catholic students echoed some of these sentiments but highlighted a broader diversification in communication

methods resulting from the pandemic, e.g., “I had to resort to means of communication that I would otherwise not use that often. As a result, the type of communication diversified”. They expressed that the necessity to use communication tools enriched their interactions as shown in many students’ statements: “I found new ways to communicate”, “Because it was challenging to meet fellow students, for example, it was necessary to find new ways of communication”, “written communication (e.g., email) was promoted as it was the only way to reach people”, “The group of people I communicated with has increased and this also required different forms of communication”. One student, in particular, experienced a unique opportunity to engage with individuals in vulnerable settings, where they learned not only to communicate with empathy but also to adapt their communication style to meet the needs of diverse audiences. As she stated: “Through a job that only exists because of the corona pandemic, I had a lot of contact with people in a nursing home and I learned how to communicate with elderly people”. The catholic students acknowledged that this forced reliance on written correspondence led to significant improvements in their writing skills, as some noted: “My written communication skills improved”. They learned to establish healthier boundaries for availability, understanding that constant accessibility was not always necessary for effective communication, as one student stated: “I learned that even when I’m ‘just’ at home that I don’t always have to be available for everyone, which is healthier communication”.

Orthodox students, on the other hand, focused on the strengthening of familial and peer relationships during the lockdown. They noted that their relationships with family members, particularly siblings, improved significantly as they spent more quality time together compared to the period before the pandemic. As some of the orthodox students stated: “My relations with my sister were improved, as we spent much more time together in comparison with the time before COVID-19”, “The family relations were strengthened”. The formation of student groups facilitated new connections, allowing for better communication and understanding among peers, and the social media platforms held a crucial role for maintaining contact, with students creating dedicated groups to stay connected despite physical distancing measures. As some orthodox students stated, “There were created Students’ groups which helped in the communication and the better knowing of each other”, “Due to the lockdown, we created groups in the social media so as to communicate”.

5.6 Discussion

The findings regarding students’ emotions revealed a predominant prevalence of negative sentiments across three denominational groups: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant students. Overall, students expressed a belief that their communication skills had deteriorated, adversely affecting their interactions with family members, friends, acquaintances, and online contacts. Notably, Orthodox students exhibited the most intense negative emotions, while Catholic students were more inclined to articulate positive sentiments. The Protestant students’ responses regarding their emotions mostly fall in the middle range across the emotional statements of the other two students’ groups.

Interestingly, the analysis of negative emotions revealed a progression from the most intense feelings (the first emotional response) to the least intense (the third). However, for the third emotional response, the percentage of negative sentiments among Protestant students paralleled that of Orthodox students. This may be attributed to the additional time available to rationalize emotions, allowing students to better process their feelings and experiences.

Data indicated that Orthodox students reported the highest levels of negative emotions compared to their Protestant and Catholic counterparts. This suggests that Orthodox students felt particularly isolated in their communication, reflecting a significant lack of emotional connection. In Greece, the lockdown measures during COVID-19 were notably stricter than in other European countries. To leave their homes, residents were required to send SMS messages to authorities, indicating their purpose for being outside, which included options such as shopping, health-related reasons, walking a pet, or caring for someone in need.

Furthermore, the milder climate in Greece typically allows students to engage in outdoor social interactions at cafes, bars, and other venues. Consequently, the restrictions of lockdown may have felt even more pronounced as a deprivation of their usual communication with others. Digital platforms such as phones, Facebook, and Instagram did not adequately satisfy their need for in-person interaction. Orthodox students particularly emphasized the importance of solidarity and daily assistance in their communication, which was hindered during the lockdown. They expressed an intense inner need for human contact that could not be fully met through technological means.

The diverse emotional experiences shared by the students underscore a common theme: the shift toward digital communication has negatively affected verbal communication skills and confidence. The collective voices of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox students highlight the irreplaceable value of face-to-face interaction, emphasizing the necessity for educational environments to prioritize personal contact and the development of robust communication skills.

The reflections from Protestant and Orthodox students regarding interpersonal contact and social interaction reveal a shared understanding of the critical role that personal engagement plays in effective collaboration. The transition to

primarily digital communication not only diminished opportunities for direct interaction but also cultivated a greater appreciation for the benefits and nuances of human contact. As students navigate this evolving landscape, fostering interpersonal relationships proves essential for personal development and a healthy educational environment.

Both Protestant and Orthodox students articulated distinct challenges related to digital communication. Protestant students focused on the diminished quality of interpersonal exchanges, while Orthodox students highlighted emotional barriers that hindered authentic expression on digital platforms. Together, these perspectives illuminate the importance of cultivating meaningful connections, suggesting that as educational environments continue to evolve, reintegrating personal interactions is vital for enhancing communication and community among students.

In conclusion, the emotional experiences shared by both Protestant and Orthodox students underscore the intricate relationship between isolation, fear, and reduced emotional expression during the pandemic. While Protestant students grappled with feelings of personal insignificance in the broader context of societal suffering, Orthodox students contended with feelings of alienation. Their insights collectively emphasize the critical need to promote open communication and emotional support as students seek to navigate the lasting effects of the pandemic on their mental health and interpersonal relationships.

When comparing the three denominational perspectives, it is clear that, while all groups adopted new forms of communication, they did so for different reasons and with varied outcomes. Protestant students concentrated on enhancing their digital skills and maximizing efficiency through technology, Catholics emphasized personal growth and empathetic connections nurtured through diverse communication methods, and Orthodox students highlighted strengthened familial bonds and peer relationships that resulted from increased communication efforts. Each community not only adapted to the shifting communication landscape but also discovered opportunities for deeper connections and personal growth, thereby transforming their interactions in meaningful ways. These collective experiences demonstrate a remarkable resilience and adaptability across different faiths during a challenging time.

6. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the research findings underscore the complex interplay between faith, culture, and communication experiences during the pandemic among students of different denominations. While all groups navigated the challenges posed by lockdowns, their reflections revealed distinct emotional landscapes shaped by their backgrounds and traditions.

Orthodox students, influenced by their Mediterranean culture, demonstrated a profound need for in-person interaction and emotional expression, which was significantly disrupted by the lockdown. This disruption led to heightened feelings of isolation and pessimism, contrasting with the more tempered responses of their counterparts in other religious groups. The Orthodox tradition, which emphasizes community and connection, intensified their sense of loss during this period of enforced separation.

In contrast, while both Protestant and Catholic students faced similar environmental conditions, their emotional responses diverged markedly. Catholic students exhibited more optimism and resilience despite the challenges of digital communication, suggesting that their faith perhaps fosters a more hopeful outlook in difficult times. Protestant students, on the other hand, reported a more neutral stance, highlighting a subtle but important distinction in how different faith traditions influence perceptions and emotional responses to communication barriers.

The findings raise critical questions concerning the role of religious beliefs and practices in shaping students' emotional experiences and coping mechanisms during the pandemic. Future research could benefit from exploring these denominational differences more deeply, providing insights into how faith impacts social interactions and individual resilience in times of crisis.

This study emphasizes the importance of fostering environments that prioritize personal interaction and emotional support in educational settings. As students move forward, the recognition of the value of diverse perspectives and the irreplaceable nature of face-to-face communication will be crucial in rebuilding and strengthening interpersonal relationships in a post-pandemic world.

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