

When Use is Not Acceptance: A Meta-Ethnography of Emergency Online Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

When participation in a technology is institutionally required, observed use loses much of its discriminating value, because endorsement, compliance, reluctance and pragmatic accommodation leave the same behavioral trace, and what acceptance means under such conditions is insufficiently specified. This article examines that problem through an extreme case: the 2020 emergency transition to online higher education, in which participation was institutionally constrained, although individual alternatives were not systematically documented. Seven qualitative and mixed-methods studies of that period, from six countries, were purposively selected and synthesized using Noblit and Hare's meta-ethnography. Reciprocal translation produced six third-order constructs and suggests a six-element account of constrained acceptance: crisis constraint, limited alternatives, pragmatic compliance, relational cost, negotiated legitimacy and routinization. The elements form a line of argument rather than a temporal sequence, and the last is advanced as an interpretive proposal rather than a finding. Participants' own accounts distinguish adequacy from compliance: students report completing requirements while judging that they were not learning, and academic staff question whether online tools were sufficient for the curriculum or merely required. The account suggests what usage records alone may not capture: the relational costs of participation and judgments about whether the arrangement is educationally sound. The corpus is small, purposively assembled and student-dominant, which bounds the account.

Keywords: technology acceptance, constrained adoption, meta-ethnography, higher education, online learning, institutional legitimacy

1. Introduction

Research on technology acceptance has produced powerful accounts of the beliefs and intentions associated with technology use (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003), and the field has accumulated enough evidence to support meta-analytic synthesis (Marikyan et al., 2026). It has never been blind to constraint: voluntariness of use has figured as a moderator since the early extensions of the Technology Acceptance Model (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000), and a distinct body of work examines adoption in mandated organizational settings (Brown et al., 2002). What remains underspecified is narrower, and more consequential for how evidence is read. When participation is institutionally required, observed use ceases to discriminate: it cannot by itself separate endorsement from compliance, reluctant participation or pragmatic accommodation, because each produces the same behavioral trace. Acceptance is not a uniform property of use either, since attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the same technology differ across cultural settings (Ma et al., 2024).

The question is not marginal. Institutions increasingly adopt technologies on their members' behalf: learning platforms selected centrally, monitoring and analytics systems embedded in academic processes, and artificial intelligence tools whose use is expected rather than offered. Recent work on compulsory e-learning and other institutionally structured forms of technology use underlines how consequential voluntariness is for interpreting adoption (Montazer & Farazkish, 2026; Weber et al., 2026), and research on artificial intelligence in higher education is following the same path (Akti Aslan et al., 2026; Reyes et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). In such settings the option of declining is narrowed or withdrawn, usage statistics accumulate, and they tell us progressively less about what users make of what they are using.

This article approaches the problem through an extreme case. Between March 2020 and the end of that year, higher education institutions worldwide suspended in-person provision and moved teaching online, in conditions widely described at the time as emergency remote teaching rather than designed online education (Ferri et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). The interest of this episode, for present purposes, is not its scale or its brutality but its structure: it removed the alternative almost completely, for entire populations, at once. Participation continued, and continued at volume, yet the fact of continuation alone cannot be read as endorsement when meaningful alternatives have been withdrawn. The period thus offers something rare, a setting in which use and acceptance were forcibly separated and can be examined apart.

We take that separation as our object. Using Noblit and Hare's (1988) meta-ethnography, we translate concepts across seven qualitative and mixed-methods studies of the 2020 transition in

order to ask how participation was sustained when it was not chosen, and what participants withheld while continuing to take part. The result is an account of constrained acceptance in which six elements are ordered as a line of argument: crisis constraint, limited alternatives, pragmatic compliance, relational cost, negotiated legitimacy and routinization. The ordering is interpretive rather than temporal. The corpus documents the elements and the tensions within them; it does not document the passage of individuals from one to the next, and the account is framed accordingly.

The contribution is therefore not the observation that required use may fall short of endorsement, which information systems research has long distinguished and which was widely documented in 2020. It is the reconstruction, from an extreme case, of how imposed participation may become ordinary while its pedagogical legitimacy remains unresolved, and of the relational and evaluative costs incurred along the way. That process is not necessarily specific to a pandemic. The account provides a framework for examining whether similar dynamics arise wherever adoption is prescribed rather than chosen.

Throughout this article, the emergency-period corpus refers to evidence generated during the first wave of the COVID-19 emergency, in 2020. All retained studies collected their data within that period, between March and June 2020 where the primary studies report dates.

The study addresses three research questions:

- (1) How did the participants represented in the retained corpus experience and interpret participation in online learning once the alternative had been withdrawn?
- (2) How did the retained qualitative evidence construct judgments about acceptability, perceived effectiveness and pedagogical legitimacy under conditions of constrained choice?
- (3) What conditions and experiences contribute to sustaining participation when opportunities to decline are limited, and how are they related?

The corpus is student-dominant, and academic-staff accounts are represented by fewer studies. The consequences of that imbalance for the scope of each claim are set out in the Methods, and the population grounding of every construct is reported in Table 7.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Acceptance Under Constrained Choice

Acceptance research has treated voluntariness as a condition that modifies the relationship between beliefs and use rather than one that changes what use means: it moderates the effect of

subjective norm on intention in the second formulation of the Technology Acceptance Model, and appears among the moderating variables in unified accounts (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000; Venkatesh et al., 2003). Work on mandated technologies goes further, showing that attitudes under mandate do not translate into use as the voluntary models predict (Brown et al., 2002). The present synthesis begins there: if a requirement severs the link between attitude and behavior, behavior can no longer serve as a proxy for attitude, and the evidential status of use itself requires specification.

2.2. Pedagogical Legitimacy

Legitimacy is used here in a restricted and deliberately participant-centered sense. Pedagogical legitimacy refers to a judgment made by those who are required to take part: that the arrangement under which they teach or study is educationally sound, that it permits the relationships on which their teaching or learning depends, and that its burdens are distributed fairly. The judgment belongs to students and academic staff, not to regulators, institutions or evaluators, and the synthesis records it only where the primary studies report it.

So defined, pedagogical legitimacy is distinct from three adjacent notions. It is not compliance, which concerns what participants do. It is not satisfaction, which concerns how they rate a service. It is not institutional authorization, which concerns whether a provision is officially sanctioned. A provision may be authorized, used and even rated tolerable while those obliged to use it continue to judge that it does not serve the educational purpose it is meant to serve. Legitimacy in this sense is conferred by participants or withheld by them, and continued participation does not confer it.

2.3. Distinguishing Acceptance, Compliance, Resistance and Constrained Acceptance

Table 1 sets out the distinction used throughout this article. Acceptance, compliance and constrained acceptance share the same behavioral participation, so conduct does not separate them; the evaluative stance and the option set do. Resistance alone leaves a different behavioral trace, and only where declining is practicable. The table is analytic, and its rows are ideal types rather than categories into which participants sort.

2.4. Sensitizing Concepts

The analysis was informed by four sensitizing concepts, in Blumer's (1954) sense of concepts that indicate directions in which to look rather than prescribe what will be found. Technology acceptance, formulated as a relation between perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and use (Davis, 1989), was approached as a situated process of negotiation rather than a stable

behavioral variable. Pedagogical effectiveness was treated as perceived and socially mediated rather than as a purely objective outcome. Presence was examined through the distinction between cognitive, social and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 1999). Teacher and student identity were taken as central to how participants interpreted the transition; that concept is not drawn from a single source in the reference list, and the synthesis does not attribute it to one.

Table 1. *Acceptance, Compliance, Resistance and Constrained Acceptance Distinguished*

Response	Behavioral participation	Evaluative stance	Option set	What observed use shows
Acceptance	Sustained	Endorsement: the technology is judged useful and appropriate	A practicable alternative exists and is not taken	Use carries information about evaluation
Compliance	Sustained	Withheld or neutral: the requirement rather than the technology motivates use	Alternative absent, inaccessible or costly	Use shows that a requirement was met
Resistance	Reduced, partial, delayed or circumvented	Rejection, expressed through minimal engagement, workarounds or voice	Alternative absent and its absence contested	Departure from prescribed patterns carries information; conformity does not
Constrained acceptance	Sustained, and becoming routine	Partial and unresolved: participation continues while judgments about pedagogical legitimacy remain unsettled	Alternative withdrawn for an entire population at once	Use is non-diagnostic, because the three responses above converge on the same trace

Note. *Participants in the retained studies express more than one of these stances, sometimes within a single account, and the refutational synthesis reports those tensions rather than resolving them.*

Emergency remote teaching is treated here as the crisis-driven starting point of the transition, whereas distance education refers to more intentionally designed forms of online and mediated learning. The synthesis therefore examines what emergency-period experiences can cautiously suggest for distance education, without treating emergency evidence as equivalent to mature post-pandemic provision.

In this article, constrained acceptance refers to a form of online learning acceptance that emerges under crisis conditions, institutional pressure and limited alternatives. The term acceptance is used analytically rather than normatively. It does not mean approval, satisfaction or voluntary endorsement. It refers to stabilized participation under limited alternatives. The adjective constrained is therefore essential: it marks the distance between use and legitimacy. In the synthesis, constrained acceptance names a configuration of six elements: crisis constraint, limited alternatives, pragmatic compliance, relational cost, negotiated legitimacy and routinization. They are ordered as a line of argument rather than as a sequence through which participants pass, and that ordering runs from the conditions that removed the alternative to a proposed normalization that leaves the question of pedagogical legitimacy unsettled.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Design and Reporting Standards

This study adopted a focused qualitative metasynthesis design using Noblit and Hare's meta-ethnographic approach. Meta-ethnography was selected because it allows the translation of qualitative findings across studies and the generation of higher-order interpretations that go beyond aggregation, which suits objectives concerned with meanings, tensions and processes rather than effect sizes (Noblit & Hare, 1988). The reporting of the synthesis was guided by the Enhancing Transparency in Reporting the Synthesis of Qualitative Research (ENTREQ) statement and by the meta-ethnography reporting guidance (eMERGe), both of which accommodate purposive rather than exhaustive sampling of primary studies (France et al., 2019; Tong et al., 2012).

3.2. Meta-Ethnography and the Seven Phases

The synthesis distinguishes between first-order constructs, referring to participants' own accounts; second-order constructs, referring to the interpretations developed by the authors of the primary studies; and third-order constructs, referring to the integrative interpretations developed by the present synthesis (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). This distinction was applied throughout extraction and synthesis to avoid conflating the three levels.

Noblit and Hare describe seven phases, and the present study followed them as set out below.

- 1) *Getting started.* The synthesis began from the question of what observed participation can be taken to mean when the alternative has been withdrawn.
- 2) *Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest.* Studies reporting first-order qualitative accounts of higher education participation during the 2020 emergency were treated as relevant, under the criteria stated below.
- 3) *Reading the studies.* Each retained study was read repeatedly in full, and its concepts were recorded before any comparison across studies was attempted.
- 4) *Determining how the studies are related.* Concepts were compared across studies and grouped by the problem they addressed, producing the juxtapositions on which translation was subsequently performed.
- 5) *Translating the studies into one another.* Reciprocal translation was carried out concept by concept, recording both convergences and tensions. A worked example is supplied with the submission.

- 6) *Synthesizing translations.* The translations were assembled into the line of argument reported in the Results, with six third-order constructs and the six-element account they support.
- 7) *Expressing the synthesis.* The synthesis is expressed here in narrative form, in Tables 5 to 7 and in Figure 1.

3.3. Corpus Construction

Studies are selected here for the richness and translatability of their qualitative accounts, not for their representativeness of a population of publications (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). We did not conduct an exhaustive database search, and we make no claim to comprehensive coverage of the COVID-era literature on online learning in higher education. The interpretation the corpus supports is bounded accordingly.

We report the process as it occurred rather than reconstructing it as a systematic search. Studies were identified progressively through the first author's earlier reading on e-learning acceptance and emergency online learning, during preceding doctoral work. Candidate studies accumulated in that reading were revisited as the qualitative focus developed, and assessed against the criteria stated below at the point of revisiting rather than at a single screening date. No search log, database export or screening flow is reported, because none was produced, and no record counts are given at any stage. The Limitations treat that absence as a constraint on auditability, not as a methodological choice.

Three registers should be kept apart here, because they are not equally established. What is observable in the retained corpus, and checkable against Table 2: all seven studies are published in English, and no study in another language was translated or assessed; they appeared between 2020 and 2021 in six journals; they report work in six countries. What is documented as procedure: the sequence described above. What cannot be reconstructed: the databases or platforms consulted during that reading, the dates, and the number, identity and ground of exclusion of the candidate studies set aside. None of this was recorded at the time, and we do not estimate it retrospectively.

One clarification belongs here because the distinction is easy to lose. During the present revision, publisher pages, Crossref and institutional repositories were used to verify the characteristics and the bibliographic details of the seven retained studies. Those are verification platforms used after the corpus was fixed. They are not the platforms by which the corpus was assembled, and they are not reported as such.

Reading and selection proceeded in parallel rather than sequentially: as the analytic focus narrowed toward participation sustained under constrained choice, subsequent selection was guided by the conceptual gaps left by the studies already read. In particular, academic-staff accounts were sought once it became apparent that the studies read first were student-focused. Selection was discontinued when further reading ceased to introduce concepts that altered the reciprocal translation. This is reported as a practical stopping point, not as a claim of theoretical saturation, which a corpus of this size cannot support.

3.4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

- 1) empirical qualitative or mixed-methods study;
- 2) participants were students, teachers or faculty members in higher education;
- 3) the study addressed e-learning, online learning, distance education or emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 emergency;
- 4) the study contained extractable qualitative findings, such as interview data, focus group data, open-ended responses, reflective narratives, observations or thematic interpretations;
- 5) the study addressed experience, acceptance, adoption, effectiveness, satisfaction, challenges or perceptions of online and distance learning.

Studies were excluded if they were purely quantitative, conceptual papers, editorials, commentaries, literature reviews, technical platform-design papers, studies outside higher education, or articles without extractable qualitative findings.

3.5. Selection Rationale

Seven studies were retained, and the corpus was kept deliberately small. In meta-ethnography the number of studies is not an index of strength: reciprocal translation requires sustained engagement with each account, and a large corpus tends to reduce translation to thematic aggregation, which is precisely what the method is designed to avoid (France et al., 2019; Noblit & Hare, 1988).

The retained set exhibits four properties, each assessable from the studies themselves without reference to this synthesis. First, every retained study reports first-order material, that is, participants' own accounts rather than only the authors' summary of them. Second, every retained study concerns higher education during the 2020 emergency. Third, every retained study addresses the experience of participating rather than only platform features, system

performance or achievement outcomes. Fourth, the set as a whole span both student and academic-staff standpoints and six national settings, so that the translation does not rest on a single population or a single system.

These properties are stated as a retrospective explicitation, not as a procedure we can show was applied at the time. No screening record was kept, so we cannot demonstrate that they governed each retention decision as it was made, and we do not claim it. What they establish is narrower and sufficient: the criteria by which the corpus can be judged are independent of the analysis it produced, so a reader may apply them to these seven studies, and to studies we did not retain, without accepting any part of our interpretation. The six third-order constructs reported in the Results are an outcome of the translation and could not have served as selection criteria without circularity.

One retention decision requires separate justification. Son et al. (2020) is the weakest fit against criterion 3, its stated object being the mental-health impact of the pandemic rather than online learning as such. It was retained because its Results report students' accounts of the disruption of their studies under remote instruction, in the subsections on increased class workload and increased social isolation, which satisfies criterion 5. It is used only for that circumscribed purpose, as Table 3 states. A reader who judged criterion 3 unmet would remove supporting material from the constructs of presence, solitary learning and relational cost, each also grounded in Rahiem (2020) and Simamora (2020), and would not remove the construct itself.

The corpus is not balanced between students and academic staff. Student perspectives are dominant across the retained evidence, while teacher and faculty accounts are represented principally through Watermeyer et al. (2021) and Mishra et al. (2020). Claims in the synthesis are therefore phrased as corpus-based interpretations in which student evidence is stronger and teacher and faculty evidence more limited, and Table 7 reports the population grounding of each construct so that this asymmetry remains visible.

3.6. Characteristics of the Retained Studies

Table 2 reports each study as its primary source states it. The seven studies span six countries and samples from 15 students to 1,148 academic staff. The populations are uneven: four report students only, one both teachers and students, one academic staff only, and one student alongside experts and policy-makers. So is the dating: four studies place their collection between March and June 2020, two give only an approximate period, and one none. Cells reading as not reported mark items the source does not state.

Table 2. Characteristics of the Seven Retained Studies

Study	Country and setting	Participants	Field or role	Qualitative material	Data collection period
Aguilera-Hermida (2020)	United States; a public university on the east coast	270 students (166 women, 96 men); 86 per cent undergraduate	Not reported	Two open-ended survey questions, answered by 158 and 156 students, coded in Dedoose	Spring 2020, after the transition to online learning; exact dates not reported
Almaiah et al. (2020)	Jordan and Saudi Arabia; six universities	30 students and 31 experts (25 faculty members, 4 information technology specialists, 2 ministry policy-makers)	Not reported	Semi-structured interviews, analyzed thematically in NVivo	Not reported
Mishra et al. (2020)	India; Mizoram University	Survey: 78 teachers and 260 students. Interviews: 20 teachers and 20 students, nested within the survey sample	Twenty-six departments across the university	Survey with a nested semi-structured interview component, analyzed by content analysis	Lockdown period from March 2020; exact dates not reported
Rahiem (2020)	Indonesia; public university, Jakarta	80 students	Social science education, fourth semester	Learning diaries, reflective essays, two online focus groups	Diaries 4 to 18 May 2020; essays 20 May 2020; focus groups 26 and 27 May 2020
Simamora (2020)	Indonesia; Indonesia Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta	15 students	Performing arts education	Student essays, analyzed as narrative	March to June 2020
Son et al. (2020)	United States; public university, Texas	195 students analyzed	Majority engineering; also liberal arts, business, education, agriculture and life sciences, veterinary medicine	Semi-structured interview survey conducted by video conference, analyzed thematically	Most interviews about one month after the April 2020 stay-at-home order
Watermeyer et al. (2021)	United Kingdom	1,148 academic staff	Twenty-two disciplinary categories; largest groups social science, education and computer science	Online survey with open-ended questions; free-text responses analyzed using grounded theory	Survey launched 26 March 2020, open for four weeks

Note. Entries marked as not reported are items the source does not state. On one item the corpus is uniform: all seven studies describe the move online as compelled at institutional level, and none reports the option set at participant level, that is, whether a practicable alternative existed for an individual and whether anyone exercised it. The institutional fact is documented; the participant-level fact is nowhere recorded. That gap is what makes observed participation difficult to interpret, and it motivates the reporting recommendation in the Methodological Implications.

3.7. Evidence-Role Assignment

Each study was assigned an evidential role before translation began, on two criteria applied jointly: the depth of first-order material it reports, assessed from the qualitative method and the extent of participant accounts reproduced in the source, and the directness with which that material addresses participation in online learning, assessed from the study's stated object. Three studies carry primary grounding, two supporting evidence and two a bounded role. The two bounded studies are bounded for different reasons, one for the brevity of its first-order material and one because its extracts come predominantly from experts and policy-makers, so the tier is not a judgment of method. Table 3 reports the assignment, which governs how strongly each study may support an interpretive claim.

Table 3. Evidence-Role Assignment of the Retained Studies

Evidence role	Studies	Basis for the assignment	Use in the synthesis
Primary grounding	Rahiem (2020); Simamora (2020); Watermeyer et al. (2021)	Extended participant accounts directly concerning online participation	Anchoring identity disruption, solitary learning, presence and legitimacy tensions
Supporting evidence	Mishra et al. (2020); Son et al. (2020)	Participant material of moderate depth, or substantial material addressing the object indirectly	Supporting translation of disruption, presence, emotional strain, faculty adaptation and student wellbeing
Bounded evidence	Aguilera-Hermida (2020); Almaiah et al. (2020)	Limited first-order material on the experience of participating; brief open-text responses in the first study, interview extracts drawn predominantly from experts and policy-makers in the second	Cautious use for acceptance, infrastructure, support and pragmatic adaptation; not treated as deep qualitative evidence

Note. These labels describe the role each study plays here, not its design; designs are in Table 2. Almaiah et al. (2020) is a qualitative interview study, and its bounded role follows from whose voices its extracts carry rather than from any limitation of method. Son et al. (2020) is used as circumscribed support for affective cost, self-regulation demands and solitary learning, not as direct evidence of technology acceptance.

3.8. Quality Appraisal

The methodological quality of the retained studies was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme qualitative checklist, which addresses clarity of objectives, appropriateness of qualitative methodology, recruitment strategy, data collection, ethical considerations, rigor of analysis, clarity of findings and contribution to knowledge (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018).

The checklist was used as a descriptive appraisal framework, not as a scoring instrument. No numerical rating was assigned and no study was excluded on appraisal grounds. The appraisal informed how much interpretive weight each account could carry, and it is summarized in Table 4.

Each cell of Table 4 was established from the full text of the study it describes rather than from its abstract, and records what that study reports rather than what the appraisal framework asks for.

Two patterns bear on how the synthesis uses the appraisal. Ethics reporting spans five positions across the seven studies, from board approval with a number to no statement at all. Researcher positionality is explicitly stated in none of them, which is not an absence of reflexive awareness but of the statement by which a reader could assess it. Both are why the synthesis returns to first-order material wherever a source makes it available.

Table 4. CASP-Informed Appraisal of the Retained Studies

Study	Aims and design	Recruitment & data collection	Reflexivity and ethics	Analysis and findings	Overall appraisal
Aguilera-Hermida (2020)	Clear focus on emergency online learning acceptance and readiness; mixed-methods design with a bounded qualitative component	Sample fully described; two open-ended questions, with the number of respondents to each reported	No explicit positionality statement, though the author writes in the first person and reports her own teaching context; institutional review board approval and informed consent reported	Open-ended responses coded and grouped into themes; verbatim student extracts reported, including several on perceived educational value	Adequate for a focused synthesis; retained with cautious use of the open-ended evidence
Almaiah et al. (2020)	Clear aim on e-learning adoption challenges during COVID-19; qualitative interview design	Thirty students and thirty-one experts across six universities; sample composition reported by role	No positionality statement; no ethics or consent statement	Thematic analysis in NVivo reported in outline; verbatim interview extracts reported, mostly from experts rather than students	Adequate but indirect for student experience; retained for challenge and adoption evidence only
Mishra et al. (2020)	Clear aim on teaching and learning practices during lockdown; survey with a nested qualitative interview component	Survey and interview samples both reported, with departmental spread and participant demographics	Author position not stated explicitly; approval by the university ethics committee reported, without an approval number	Content analysis reported; verbatim teacher and student extracts reported, including judgments on what online delivery could and could not achieve	Good contextual qualitative contribution; retained for faculty and institutional transition evidence
Rahiem (2020)	Clear aim on the emergency remote learning experience; qualitative design combining diaries, essays and focus groups	Recruitment by researcher judgment; diaries, reflective essays and two online focus groups reported	No positionality statement; no ethics approval reported; participants stated to be aware of the scope and intent of the study, and names withheld	Two-stage coding after Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, managed in NVivo with analytic memos; focus groups used as member check, their handling not detailed; verbatim student extracts reported	Good qualitative contribution; retained as a core student-grounded study

Study	Aims and design	Recruitment & data collection	Reflexivity and ethics	Analysis and findings	Overall appraisal
Simamora (2020)	Aim stated as student obstacles in online learning during COVID-19; narrative analysis of student essays, though the introduction describes the paper as conceptual	Fifteen students in a course taught by the author; essays produced as coursework	No positionality statement and no ethics or consent statement; the author's dual role as course teacher and researcher is not addressed	Descriptive narrative analysis of moderate depth; verbatim student extracts reported with participant codes	Adequate; retained for obstacles and solitary-learning evidence, with the dual-role limitation noted
Son et al. (2020)	Clear aim on student mental health and pandemic-related disruption; interview survey with open-ended responses	Recruitment and sample clearly reported; open-ended responses reported with transparent categories	No reflexivity statement; institutional review board approval reported with approval number	Qualitative coding reported, depth limited by the survey format; verbatim extracts reported by participant code	Adequate; retained cautiously as circumscribed support for affective cost, self-regulation and solitary learning
Watermeyer et al. (2021)	Clear aim on the academic experience of the emergency online transition; qualitative survey accounts	Academic staff at United Kingdom universities, described with role, discipline and nation breakdown; free-text responses reported	No positionality statement; no ethics approval reported; respondents informed of the purpose of the research, of their anonymity and of their right to withdraw	Grounded-theory analysis of free text reported; extensive verbatim staff extracts, including accounts that run against the prevailing one	Strong qualitative contribution; retained as the principal teacher and faculty evidence

Note. The entries reflect the present authors' reading of each source. The absence of explicit positionality statements limits what a reader can assess about the primary authors' influence on their own interpretations.

3.9. Researcher Reflexivity and Analytic Safeguards

The review was conducted primarily by the first author, who identified and selected the studies, extracted the qualitative evidence, carried out the CASP-informed appraisal, performed the reciprocal translation and developed the third-order constructs. As an additional verification step, the second author read the full texts of the seven retained studies, providing a check on the appropriateness of the retained evidence and on its use within the synthesis.

Two distinct forms of independent verification should be separated, because the synthesis stands differently in relation to each. The first is independent duplication of identification and selection. This was not done, and it cannot be reconstituted now: a second screener applied after the corpus is fixed would be assessing a set already chosen, which is not duplication. We report its absence as a limitation and do not describe it otherwise. The second is independent verification of the translation, that is, of the step by which second-order concepts in the primary studies were rendered as third-order constructs. No such verification is reported in this article. The second author's reading of the seven full texts, described above, is a check on the

appropriateness of the retained evidence and on its use in the synthesis; it is a reading of the primary texts, not an independent rendering of the second-order concepts against which the first author's translation could be compared. The two are distinct, and we do not present the first as the second. Verification of the translation remains possible after the fact, because the primary texts are unchanged and the translation can be performed again from them.

The other safeguards were in place from the outset: a structured extraction matrix completed before any cross-study comparison; the separation of first-, second- and third-order constructs throughout; a refutational log in which divergent evidence was retained rather than reconciled; the second author's full-text reading of the entire corpus; and the analytic materials supplied with this submission, which allow a reader to retrace each step.

3.10. Data Extraction and Analysis

During extraction, the first author used a structured matrix to record study context, participant group, qualitative data type, first-order evidence, second-order interpretation, CASP observations and contribution to the three research questions. Ambiguous cases were resolved conservatively by returning to the full-text methods, results, tables and appendices. When the qualitative component of a mixed-methods study could not be separated clearly, the limitation was recorded rather than resolved by inference. The extraction matrix is supplied with the submission.

Concepts were then compared across studies through reciprocal translation, with attention to similarities, tensions and contextual differences. The translation matrix supplied with the submission shows how cross-study concepts were related to one another and how they informed the six third-order constructs (France et al., 2019; Noblit & Hare, 1988).

A worked reciprocal translation example was developed to make the analytic procedure auditable, beginning with source-specific concepts rather than a pre-set theme. Rahiem's student accounts were read as evidence of isolation under constrained participation; the interview-survey evidence in Son et al. translated that isolation into emotional strain, reduced motivation and self-regulation burden; and Simamora's student accounts translated the same problem into practical learning difficulty under limited interaction. The translation also recorded tensions: Son et al. foregrounded mental-health consequences, Simamora technological and instructional barriers, and the teacher and faculty evidence in Mishra et al. and Watermeyer et al. showed attempts to maintain presence that did not remove students' solitary experience. These translations produced the construct of learning as solitary performance.

The third-order constructs were stabilized through iterative comparison across the evidence matrix, the worked translation example and the refutational log. A construct was retained only when it could be linked to identifiable first-order or second-order evidence from the retained studies and when its role in the line of argument was explicit. Divergent evidence, such as appreciation of flexibility alongside fatigue, isolation or limited legitimacy, was treated as a condition shaping constrained acceptance rather than as noise to be removed. Constructs with weaker population grounding were labeled accordingly.

The line of argument was not used as an a priori coding frame. It was stabilized after source-specific concepts had been extracted, compared, reciprocally translated and checked against divergent evidence. Three alternative interpretations were considered and rejected: simple technology acceptance, generalized student dissatisfaction, and emergency coping. None accounted simultaneously for continued participation, ambivalence, the emergence of routine and incomplete legitimacy.

4. Results

The synthesis is organized around a single line of argument: the constrained acceptance account. Two levels are distinguished throughout. The six third-order constructs describe what participants reported experiencing; the six elements of the account describe how participation came to be sustained. Each element is paired with the construct that gives it its experiential content, but the two are not identical, and neither series is reported as a thematic list.

Read against the third research question, the conditions are the first two elements, crisis constraint and limited alternatives; the experiences are the six third-order constructs; and the relation between them is one of intelligibility rather than causation: each group of elements makes the next interpretable, and the corpus does not establish that participants passed from one to the next. Within this account, identity disruption and technological ambivalence concern the conditions that made acceptance constrained; the redefinition of presence and solitary learning concern the relational and affective costs of compliance; effectiveness as relational judgment and habit as constrained adaptation concern how repeated use might become ordinary without becoming legitimate or pedagogically endorsed.

Figure 1 represents the account; with the elements grouped by the work they do.

Table 5 reports the studies that ground each element and the tension retained against it. The grounding is thin and uneven: crisis constraint is translated from four studies, four elements from three each, and routinization from two; no element draws on all seven studies and no study

on all six elements. Every row carries a retained refutational contrast, so no element rests on convergent evidence alone. The sixth is both the only one marked as a proposal and the most thinly grounded.

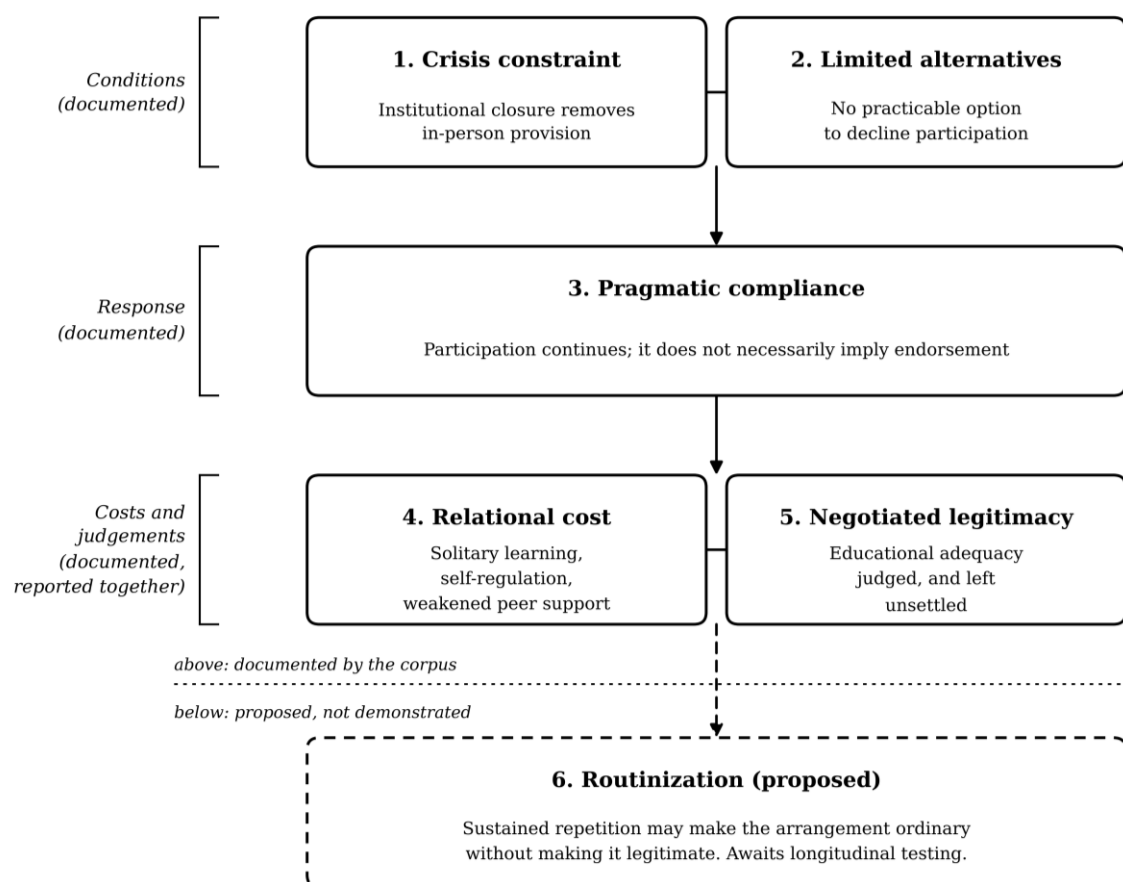


Figure 1. The Six-Element Account of Constrained Acceptance.

Note. The arrangement is a line of argument, not a chronology. Undirected connectors join elements the corpus reports together; directed connectors run only between groups. The broken rule and the broken outline mark element 6 as an interpretive proposal, not a finding demonstrated by the retained corpus.

Table 5. Constrained Acceptance as the Line of Argument

Element	Studies translated	Translation and retained tension	Contribution to the account
1. Crisis constraint	Mishra et al. (2020); Watermeyer et al. (2021); Rahiem (2020); Simamora (2020)	Emergency campus closure and rapid migration translate across studies as an imposed condition rather than an elective adoption process. The tension is that faculty accounts foreground institutional disruption and workload, while student accounts foreground loss of routine, access problems and isolation.	The participation the corpus records is enforced participation under crisis conditions, not endorsement of online learning.
2. Limited alternatives	Aguilera-Hermida (2020); Rahiem (2020); Son et al. (2020)	Students continued to participate because institutional alternatives were limited. The refutational point is that constraint did not mean uniform rejection: some students valued flexibility or continuity, while others reported motivational and emotional burden.	Online learning becomes the available route to continuity; acceptance is therefore situated and ambivalent.

Element	Studies translated	Translation and retained tension	Contribution to the account
3. Pragmatic compliance	Almaiah et al. (2020); Aguilera-Hermida (2020); Simamora (2020)	Platform use and online participation translate into pragmatic compliance mediated by infrastructure, system quality, technical support and perceived usefulness. The tension is that use may indicate necessity rather than approval.	Observed participation is read as compliance under constraint, not as evidence of pedagogical legitimacy.
4. Relational cost	Rahiem (2020); Simamora (2020); Son et al. (2020)	Despite constant connection, compliance produced solitary learning: students regulated time, motivation and technical problems with less informal peer support. The refutational point is that faculty accounts (Mishra et al., 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2021) show attempts to sustain presence that did not remove students' solitary experience.	Compliance carries a relational and affective cost; connection does not by itself restore the collective dimension of learning.
5. Negotiated legitimacy	Aguilera-Hermida (2020); Mishra et al. (2020); Watermeyer et al. (2021)	Perceived effectiveness translates as a socially mediated judgment shaped by institutional framing, comparison with face-to-face learning and available support. The tension is that framing online learning as innovation could shift difficulties onto individuals, while acknowledging constraint allowed participants to voice ambivalence.	Participation can continue while judgments about quality, recognition and fairness remain unsettled.
6. Routinization (proposed)	Aguilera-Hermida (2020); Rahiem (2020)	Repeated participation is reported alongside procedural familiarity and continued reservation. What the corpus does not contain is any observation of normalization occurring: the move from repetition to normalization is inferred rather than evidenced.	Advanced as an interpretive proposal: that sustained repetition under withdrawn alternatives may produce partial normalization without pedagogical legitimacy. The proposal requires longitudinal testing.

Note. The account is a line-of-argument interpretation, to be read within emergency-period evidence and not as a causal model.

4.1. Evidence Matrix

Table 6 reports the translation behind each construct. The constructs are not equally supported: two are translated from four studies, three from three, and habit as constrained adaptation from two. Five of the six are anchored in participants' own words; habit as constrained adaptation is not, and rests on the primary authors' reports. The corpus bears unevenly on the account, with Almaiah et al. (2020) contributing to one construct and Rahiem (2020) to four.

Six of the seven retained studies supply verbatim participant material, reproduced in the subsections above. The exception is Almaiah et al. (2020), whose interview extracts come predominantly from e-learning experts and ministry policy-makers rather than from students or teaching staff, which confines that study's contribution to infrastructure and support. Watermeyer et al. (2021) supplies academic staff extracts in quantity but no student voice, a limit of population rather than of participant voice.

Table 6. Evidence Matrix Linking Retained Studies to Third-Order Constructs

Construct	Studies	Qualitative material extracted	Translated concepts	Third-order interpretation
Forced transition as identity disruption	Watermeyer et al. (2021); Mishra et al. (2020); Rahiem (2020); Simamora (2020)	Academic staff accounts; student reflective narratives; qualitative perceptions of disrupted routines, roles and campus practices	Role disruption; loss of control; emergency adaptation; disruption of student routine	The emergency transition destabilized academic identities and required role reconstruction
Technological ambivalence	Aguilera-Hermida (2020); Almaiah et al. (2020); Mishra et al. (2020); Simamora (2020)	Open-ended student responses, student essays and interview evidence on flexibility, access, stress, connectivity constraints and platform dependence	Opportunity and threat held together; technological stress; infrastructure dependence	Acceptance emerged through negotiation between affordances and constraints
Redefinition of presence	Watermeyer et al. (2021); Son et al. (2020); Rahiem (2020)	Academic staff accounts and student responses on mediated communication, altered participation signals, reduced informal interaction and online teaching presence	Mediated presence; interaction loss; changed participation signals	Presence became fragmented and had to be actively designed rather than assumed
Learning as solitary performance	Rahiem (2020); Simamora (2020); Son et al. (2020)	Student reflective essays, open-ended responses and interview-survey data on isolation, self-regulation, motivation and reduced peer support	Isolation; self-management; emotional strain; reduced peer learning	Online learning shifted responsibility from collective environments to individual coping
Effectiveness as relational judgment	Aguilera-Hermida (2020); Mishra et al. (2020); Watermeyer et al. (2021)	Student and staff perceptions linking effectiveness to institutional expectations, available support and comparison with face-to-face learning	Perceived quality; institutional framing; satisfaction; comparison with prior provision	Effectiveness was constructed through expectation, support and context rather than measured as a property of the medium
Habit as constrained adaptation	Aguilera-Hermida (2020); Rahiem (2020)	Evidence on repeated platform use, pragmatic adjustment, limited alternatives and adaptation under constraint, reported by the primary authors rather than quoted from participants	Adaptability; constrained routine; pragmatic continuation	Repeated use did not necessarily indicate endorsement; habit may reflect constrained adaptation

The construct without a verbatim anchor accordingly carries the most cautious claims in the synthesis, and it is the one paired with the element advanced as a proposal. Table 3 records these limits and restricts each study's reach accordingly.

4.2. Element 1: Crisis Constraint and Forced Transition as Identity Disruption

Across the retained studies, the emergency transition was reported not as a change of instructional medium but as a disruption of academic identities. For academic staff, the loss of the physical classroom unsettled pedagogical authority, relational presence and professional competence. One respondent in Watermeyer et al. (2021) put the change in terms of what they

were becoming: “I am becoming a more disembodied and depersonalised purveyor of education” (Afflictions). For students, the disappearance of campus routines, peer interaction and embodied participation weakened the social markers through which student identity is ordinarily constructed (Mishra et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Simamora, 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2021).

4.3. Element 2: Limited Alternatives and Technological Ambivalence

The retained studies report attitudes that were rarely simply positive or negative. Participants recognized flexibility, access to resources and the possibility of continuity, while simultaneously reporting technological dependence, platform fatigue, uncertainty and anxiety. A student in Simamora (2020) states the ambivalence directly: “All choices have positive and negative impacts, including the choice to do online learning” (IF.2, p. 92). This ambivalence matters because online learning remained the available route to participation even where it was experienced as burdensome. Acceptance was therefore negotiated under constrained choice rather than freely given (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Almaiah et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2020; Simamora, 2020).

4.4. Element 3: Pragmatic Compliance and the Redefinition of Presence

Online learning reconfigured presence rather than removing it. That statement is an interpretation of this synthesis, and it rests on three strands of the retained accounts. Academic staff in Watermeyer et al. (2021) describe interaction becoming mediated and their own conduct becoming performative within an altered professional role. Students in Rahiem (2020) describe isolation and the domestic constraints under which they went on participating. Students in Son et al. (2020) locate the loss in the absence of ordinary contact rather than in the technology: “We’re in quarantine so there is significant social isolation from people and from those that I want to hang out with” (MBP01, Increased Social Isolation). What the retained accounts do not describe is which features of the online settings carried presence, and the synthesis makes no claim about them.

The pairing of this construct with pragmatic compliance is interpretive rather than empirical. The compliance translated at this point comes from Almaiah et al. (2020), Aguilera-Hermida (2020) and Simamora (2020), where participation is sustained through infrastructure, system quality, technical support and perceived usefulness. The redefinition of presence comes from a different set of studies, Rahiem (2020), Son et al. (2020) and Watermeyer et al. (2021), and the extraction presented here does not establish their joint occurrence within a single study. The

pairing proposes that continued participation and altered presence are aspects of one situation; it is not established by an account that observes them jointly, and Table 5 and Table 6 record the two groundings separately so that the distinction remains visible.

4.5. Element 4: Relational Cost and Learning as Solitary Performance

Despite constant connection, online learning was frequently reported as solitary, with students regulating time, motivation, participation and technical problems with less informal peer support. A student in Rahiem (2020) describes the effort of working through material without the recourse a classroom affords: “I try to understand the tasks or modules provided, read all through them, yet I still don’t get it” (4C30, p. 12). The burden was also quantitative. A student in Son et al. (2020) reports that remote delivery “basically doubles the time I have to dedicate each week for that class” (ERP04, Increased Class Workload), and a student in Simamora (2020) that “the tasks are increasingly booming and counting. This is what makes students uneasy” (IM.4, p. 92). The cost was not confined to students: a respondent in Watermeyer et al. (2021) reports being “merely stressed out of my wits, as are my students” (Afflictions). Within the account, solitary learning is the cost incurred when compliance with online participation occurs without sufficient social and peer infrastructure (Rahiem, 2020; Simamora, 2020; Son et al., 2020).

4.6. Element 5: Negotiated Legitimacy and Effectiveness as Relational Judgment

Perceived effectiveness was shaped by expectations, institutional narratives, comparisons with face-to-face learning and prevailing norms. Effectiveness therefore emerged as a socially mediated judgment rather than as a property of platforms or delivery modes.

This is the point at which pedagogical legitimacy, as defined in the Theoretical Framework, is at stake, and the retained accounts record participants making exactly that judgment while continuing to take part. Students in Aguilera-Hermida (2020) report a “lack of educational value” in the revised coursework, and one states plainly, “I felt like I wasn’t learning at all” (Online Educational Challenges). Among academic staff the judgment is more often qualified by subject matter: an associate professor in Mishra et al. (2020) observes that where content is abstract, many concepts “need real face to face interaction for complete understanding” (Findings, objective three).

One faculty respondent in the same study frames the problem in almost the terms this article uses, asking whether students found the online tools “sufficient enough to comprehend the theoretical portion of the course curriculum, or they were just using them as a mandatory online learning medium” (Findings, objective three). The question is posed from inside the setting, by

someone with no stake in the present synthesis, and it marks the distinction between adequacy and compliance as one the participants themselves drew (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Mishra et al., 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2021).

4.7. Element 6: Routinization, Advanced as a Proposal

The sixth element differs from the other five in its evidential status.

What the corpus documents is repeated use under withdrawn alternatives, reported alongside continued reservation (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Rahiem, 2020). The reservation is recorded in participants' own words: a student in Aguilera-Hermida (2020) who had not previously taken an online course describes the experience as "a struggle that I hope I never have to go through again" (Online Educational Challenges). The repeated use is not. It is reported by the primary authors, who record increased platform use and pragmatic adjustment, and no participant in the corpus describes the arrangement becoming ordinary.

What it does not document is normalization occurring. Parts of the corpus do have some temporal depth: Rahiem (2020) collected learning diaries over a fortnight, and participants in several studies describe change relative to their pre-closure experience. Depth of that order does not reach the transition the element asserts, from repeated compliance to an arrangement treated as ordinary, and the whole corpus sits inside a window of a few months in 2020, as Table 2 records. The element is therefore under-determined by the available evidence.

The element is advanced as an interpretive proposal. Sustained repetition under conditions in which the alternative has been withdrawn may produce partial normalization: the arrangement becomes ordinary without becoming endorsed, and its pedagogical legitimacy remains unsettled rather than resolved. The proposal is consistent with the retained accounts and is not established by them.

So stated, the proposal is testable, and its conditions of refutation can be specified. It does not hold that normalization without legitimacy always follows constraint, nor that legitimacy judgments never improve. It holds that the two can come apart and remain apart under sustained constraint. Evidence that legitimacy judgments track continued use closely once the arrangement becomes familiar, in populations for whom the alternative remains withdrawn, would weaken it. Evidence that the divergence is an artifact of the emergency itself, appearing in crisis conditions and not in constrained settings outside them, would defeat it. A later convergence between use and legitimacy in a population that regained a practicable alternative would not count against it, since the proposal concerns what happens while the alternative is absent.

The other five elements are grounded in the corpus and converge on a situation in which participation continues while legitimacy is withheld; routinization names what may follow if that situation persists.

4.8. Refutational Synthesis

The account was not built only from convergent evidence. Four tensions were retained because they prevent it from becoming linear or author-imposed.

Flexibility against constraint. Some participants valued what the arrangement made possible, so constraint should not be read as simple rejection. A student in Rahiem (2020) observes that “the flexible learning schedule matches our lifestyle; young people” (4B26, p. 15), and a respondent in Watermeyer et al. (2021) reports that “the transition to full remote teaching is making my job VASTLY EASIER” (Affordances). Flexibility and constraint coexisted: participants could appreciate convenience while still reporting limited alternatives, isolation or weakened relational support. These accounts are a minority within the corpus, but they are not marginal to the argument, since an account of constrained acceptance that could not accommodate them would be an account of dissatisfaction instead.

Continuity against legitimacy. That teaching and learning continued during emergency provision does not demonstrate pedagogical legitimacy. Continuity showed institutional resilience; it did not show that participants considered the arrangements educationally sound or socially adequate.

Habit against endorsement. Repeated platform use could indicate adaptation, fatigue, resignation or procedural familiarity rather than endorsement. This tension is why routinization is treated as a proposal.

Teacher effort against student solitude. Faculty accounts report intensified effort to sustain presence, feedback and continuity. Student accounts nevertheless indicate that such effort did not always translate into experienced social presence, peer connection or reduced solitary burden.

4.9. Population Grounding

Table 7 reports which population grounds each construct and how the claim is worded in consequence. Three constructs draw on both student and faculty material, two on student material alone, and technological ambivalence is mainly student-grounded with a teacher strand documented in a single study. None is grounded in faculty material alone.

Table 7. Population Grounding of the Third-Order Constructs

Construct	Population grounding	Evidence basis	Wording used in the synthesis
Forced transition as identity disruption	Mixed	Faculty accounts emphasize altered pedagogical authority and professional role disruption; student accounts emphasize disrupted routines, expectations and study identity	Claimed as a shared disruption carrying different meanings for the two groups
Technological ambivalence	Mainly student-grounded, with a documented teacher strand	Student responses on flexibility, access, connectivity, platform dependence and explicit ambivalence about studying online (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Simamora, 2020); teacher accounts of relief at continuing to work alongside unstable connections and of the limits of online delivery for abstract content (Mishra et al., 2020). Almaiah et al. (2020) contributes material on infrastructure, support and barriers, carried by extracts drawn predominantly from experts and policy-makers rather than from students or teaching staff	Claimed for both populations. The two strands are named rather than counted, because the studies attributed to this construct differ in the depth of their first-order material and in whose voice carries it, as Table 3 records
Redefinition of presence	Mixed	Faculty studies foreground teaching presence and mediated interaction; student evidence foregrounds perceived distance, reduced informal contact and altered participation signals	Claimed across both populations, while recognizing that each strand evidences a different aspect of presence
Learning as solitary performance	Student-grounded	Student reflective accounts and interview-survey evidence on isolation, self-regulation, motivation and weaker peer support (Rahiem, 2020; Simamora, 2020; Son et al., 2020)	Claimed as a student experience. Faculty evidence enters as a refutational tension, staff attempts to sustain presence that did not remove the solitary experience, and is not counted as grounding for the construct
Effectiveness as relational judgment	Mixed	Students link effectiveness to feedback, interaction, flexibility and support; faculty accounts link it to pedagogical redesign and the limits of emergency delivery	Claimed as relational rather than technical, with distinct emphases in each population
Habit as constrained adaptation	Student-grounded	Student evidence of pragmatic compliance and continued use under limited alternatives (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Rahiem, 2020), reported by the primary authors rather than quoted from participants. No faculty evidence is attributed to this construct	Claimed as constrained adaptation on student evidence alone. The synthesis makes no claim about faculty here, and does not present the construct as endorsement by either population

Note. The corpus is student-dominant. No construct is presented as equally evidenced across both populations unless both strands are directly represented in the studies attributed to it in Table 6.

5. Discussion

5.1. Principal Findings

Taken together, the findings shift the analytical question from whether a technology was used to what observed use can legitimately be taken to mean when participation is constrained. Technology acceptance research has long recognized that voluntariness varies across

implementation settings, and mandated use has been examined directly (Brown et al., 2002; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). The synthesis therefore does not treat constraint as an overlooked condition. It identifies a problem of interpretation that constraint makes acute, and an asymmetry easily left unexamined: the institution that prescribes a technology, or makes declining it impractical, also participates in producing the behavioral trace that may subsequently be read as evidence of its acceptance.

That asymmetry has an epistemic consequence. Usage data become least discriminating exactly where institutions make them most abundant, and an institution that evaluates a prescribed technology through participation it has itself required risks reading the consequences of its own implementation decision back as evidence of acceptance.

The six elements specify what such data leave out. Two of them matter most here, because they name dimensions that routine usage records leave outside view: the effort of sustaining learning with weakened peer and teacher support, and the judgments participants form about whether the arrangement is educationally adequate. A stable participation rate is therefore compatible with substantial pedagogical reservations that those records do not capture (Calderwood, 2026). What an institution discloses about its own data collection is a separate question: telling students what is being collected raises their awareness of the practice (Sepp, 2025), which is not the same as their endorsing the arrangement being recorded.

Routinization, were it to occur, would not constitute institutional validation. From a practice perspective, technologies and associated structures are enacted through recurrent use (Orlikowski, 2000), but a technology may become ordinary because it has been absorbed into practice, timetables and expectations, and not because those required to use it have concluded that it serves them well. The account therefore separates behavioral normalization from evaluative legitimacy. Whether that separation persists over time is the empirical question the present corpus cannot answer.

Three questions follow, well beyond the setting from which the account was derived: who prescribes the technology, who is in a position to decline it, and who defines successful adoption. None is answered by usage data, and all three become more consequential as the option of declining narrows.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

The first contribution is not a new predictor of technology use but a qualification of the evidential status of use itself. Where meaningful alternatives remain available, observed use

may carry information about users' evaluations. As the possibility of declining narrows, the same observation becomes progressively less diagnostic, because structurally different orientations produce the same behavioral trace.

Second, the account links constraint to legitimacy without collapsing the two. Mandated participation explains why use may continue; it does not determine what participants come to think of the technology. Constrained acceptance is therefore not the opposite of acceptance but a condition in which behavioral participation and evaluative legitimacy diverge, which is why Table 1 distinguishes it from compliance and from resistance.

Third, the account offers a sensitizing framework for settings beyond the one from which it was derived, including centrally selected platforms, analytics systems and institutionally expected artificial intelligence tools. It does not establish that these reproduce the 2020 configuration, which emergency-period evidence cannot support. It identifies questions that become relevant wherever declining is difficult: what sustains participation, what it costs, what legitimacy is negotiated, and whether routine reflects endorsement or accommodation. Its transferability lies in those concepts, each constrained setting requiring direct empirical examination.

5.3. Institutional Implications

The synthesis derives from an extreme case and cannot determine institutional policy. The following are considerations it brings into view rather than recommendations it establishes, and each would need local evidence before being acted on.

Usage is not acceptance. Login frequency, attendance and repeated participation establish that a technology was used, not that it was judged adequate. Where use is required, such measures cannot distinguish endorsement from compliance.

Participation has costs that are not recorded. The retained accounts report self-regulation demands, isolation and weakened peer support accompanying sustained participation. Such costs are borne individually and rarely appear in institutional records; establishing whether they are present requires asking rather than counting.

Presence is built, not supplied. Across the corpus, presence had to be actively constructed through feedback, interaction routines and recognizable availability. It did not follow from platform access or synchronous scheduling.

Legitimacy is distinct from adoption, including where use has become routine. Routine use should not substitute for direct inquiry into whether those required to use a technology consider the arrangement educationally sound, socially supportable and fair.

5.4. Methodological Implications

The gap recorded in the note to Table 2, between documented institutional compulsion and an unrecorded participant-level option set, carries an implication for how evidence about prescribed technologies is produced. Studies that interpret observed usage as evidence of acceptance should report what alternative existed for the individual respondent at the time of data collection, whether it was practically accessible, and whether anyone exercised it. Absent that information, an observed association between perceived usefulness and continued use is difficult to interpret. This is a matter of reporting rather than instrument design, and it is inexpensive to satisfy.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

The limitations are substantial and bear directly on what the account can claim.

The corpus was assembled purposively and no screening record was produced, so the synthesis cannot claim to represent the full range of emergency-period accounts, qualifying studies are certainly absent, and the selection cannot be independently reconstructed. The Methods name what is unreportable in consequence, item by item, and none of it is estimated here. The corpus is also restricted to English-language publications, which is a limit of the corpus rather than a finding about the literature. It is student-dominant, and Table 7 restricts the claims accordingly. All seven studies collected data during the first wave of 2020, so the synthesis describes that period alone and is not an evaluation of deliberately designed provision. Several are mixed-methods studies with bounded qualitative components, so only extractable qualitative findings were used. Two further constraints follow from Table 2: no study reports the option set available to participants, and the reporting of participant characteristics is uneven.

Identification, selection, extraction and appraisal were carried out by the first author and were not independently duplicated, and no independent verification of the conceptual translation is reported in this article. The Researcher Reflexivity subsection sets out what was and was not verified, and why a second screener applied now could not reconstitute an independent selection. The consequence is specific: the third-order constructs rest on a single reader's rendering of the second-order concepts, so their reproducibility across readers is not established, and the account should be weighed as one defensible reading of the corpus rather than as a translation shown to be stable. The analytic materials supplied with the submission are the means by which a reader can test it against the primary texts.

Three lines of inquiry follow. The first would test element 6: a longitudinal design measuring use alongside direct elicitation of legitimacy judgments, while the alternative remains absent,

since a single cross-section cannot separate an arrangement that has been accepted from one that has merely become familiar. The second concerns transfer. Recent work has begun to examine acceptance and resistance transitions and compulsory digital adoption beyond the emergency period (Montazer & Farazkish, 2026; Shamsi, 2026), and the account calls for extending that agenda to centrally selected platforms, analytics systems and institutionally expected artificial intelligence tools, each of which differs from emergency provision in ways that may alter the elements. The third concerns the moment this corpus could not capture: the point at which a genuine alternative is restored, allowing continued use to regain some of the discriminating value that constraint removed.

6. Conclusion

The emergency transition of 2020 produced an unusual empirical condition: online participation continued at scale while meaningful alternatives were severely restricted. Read as an extreme case, that period makes visible a distinction easier to overlook under ordinary conditions: continued use and acceptance are not equivalent when participation cannot readily be refused.

Across seven studies, the meta-ethnography reconstructs that distinction through six elements: crisis constraint, limited alternatives, pragmatic compliance, relational cost, negotiated legitimacy and routinization. Their relationship is interpretive rather than temporal, and the last is advanced as a proposal requiring longitudinal verification. Together they suggest how participation may become ordinary without acquiring pedagogical legitimacy.

The account remains bounded by a small, purposively assembled and predominantly student corpus drawn from an exceptional period. Its value is heuristic rather than predictive. It offers a vocabulary for examining other settings in which technologies are prescribed, embedded in institutional processes or difficult to decline. In such settings the central question is not whether people use the technology, but what that use can legitimately be taken to mean.

Supplementary Materials

The analytic materials supporting this synthesis are supplied in the Appendix. They comprise the retained corpus and the basis for its retention, the evidence eligibility of each study, the qualitative extraction matrix, the evidence anchors, the reciprocal translation matrix, a worked translation example, the CASP-informed appraisal, a study-level justification, and the evidence anchors and refutational notes for the six elements. They are provided for auditability and are not required in order to follow the argument.

Artificial Intelligence Use Declaration

Generative AI tools (ChatGPT, OpenAI, GPT-5.6 Sol) were used for organizational support, and language revision. During revision they were additionally used to locate published versions of the retained studies. All such material was verified by the authors against the primary texts, and the selection of which extracts to quote, and of what each support, was the authors' own.

These tools were not used to identify or select the studies, to form the quality appraisal judgments, to perform the reciprocal translation, or to develop the third-order constructs. The material they located was checked against the primary texts, as stated above, and responsibility for every analytic decision, and for the accuracy and integrity of the final manuscript, remains with the authors.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. No financial, personal, or professional relationships have influenced the research, analysis, or conclusions presented in this work.

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Appendix

Supplementary Analytic Materials

These materials document the analytic trail of a focused meta-ethnographic synthesis of seven purposively selected qualitative and mixed-methods studies of first-wave emergency online learning in higher education. They are deposited for auditability. They are not required in order to follow the argument of the article.

The corpus was assembled purposively rather than through an exhaustive search. No search log, database export or screening flow is reported here, because none was produced: the studies were identified progressively through earlier reading of the literature on e-learning acceptance and emergency online learning, and were revisited as the qualitative focus of the synthesis developed. These materials therefore document how the retained studies were used, not how a search was conducted.

S1. Retained corpus and basis for retention

Retained study	Basis for retention
Aguilera-Hermida (2020)	Mixed-methods study; qualitative component on student acceptance of emergency online learning
Almaiah et al. (2020)	Mixed-methods study with an interview component on distance and online learning challenges during COVID-19
Mishra et al. (2020)	Higher-education online teaching-learning study with a qualitative/mixed component
Rahiem (2020)	Qualitative phenomenological study of university students' emergency remote learning
Simamora (2020)	Qualitative essay analysis of online learning challenges during COVID-19
Son et al. (2020)	Mixed-methods interview survey with qualitative evidence from college students
Watermeyer et al. (2021)	Empirical higher-education study on digital disruption in UK universities

S2. Evidence eligibility of the retained studies

The synthesis used only qualitative findings, or qualitative components extractable from mixed-methods studies.

Retained study	Qualitative evidence used	Use in synthesis
Aguilera-Hermida (2020)	Open-ended student responses	Acceptance, adaptation and constraints
Almaiah et al. (2020)	Interview/thematic evidence at universities	Distance and online learning challenges and barriers
Mishra et al. (2020)	Qualitative/mixed perceptions	Online teaching-learning during lockdown
Rahiem (2020)	Phenomenological diaries, essays and online focus group	Emergency remote learning experience
Simamora (2020)	Qualitative essay analysis	Online learning challenges
Son et al. (2020)	Interview-survey qualitative responses	Affective cost, self-regulation and solitary learning
Watermeyer et al. (2021)	Academic staff accounts	Digital disruption and online migration

S3. Qualitative extraction matrix

This matrix records the qualitative material used to connect each retained study to the synthesis. It is an audit trail, not a frequency table.

Study	Context and method	First-order evidence	Second-order concepts	Contribution to third-order constructs
Aguilera-Hermida (2020)	Higher education students; mixed-methods study on emergency online learning acceptance	Students described forced adaptation, motivation changes, and pragmatic continuation under limited alternatives	Emergency acceptance; adaptation; perceived usefulness under constraint	Technological ambivalence; habit as constrained adaptation; effectiveness as relational judgment
Almaiah et al. (2020)	Universities during COVID-19; mixed-methods/interview component on e-learning system use	Participants highlighted connectivity, system quality, technical barriers and support needs	Critical challenges; infrastructure dependence; system support	Technological ambivalence; habit as constrained adaptation

Mishra et al. (2020)	Higher education online teaching-learning during lockdown	Accounts described rapid pedagogical adjustment, online teaching challenges and need for institutional support	Emergency online teaching-learning; pedagogical adjustment; support needs	Forced transition as identity disruption; technological ambivalence; effectiveness as relational judgment
Rahiem (2020)	University students in Indonesia; qualitative phenomenological study	Students described isolation, self-regulation demands, family/home constraints and emergency adaptation	Emergency remote learning experience; solitary learning; learner resilience	Forced transition as identity disruption; redefinition of presence; learning as solitary performance; habit as constrained adaptation
Simamora (2020)	Performing arts education students; essay analysis during COVID-19	Students described limited interaction, practical learning difficulties, motivation issues and access constraints	Online learning challenges; discipline-specific loss; self-management burden	Forced transition as identity disruption; learning as solitary performance; effectiveness as relational judgment
Son et al. (2020)	College students in the United States; interview survey with qualitative component	Students reported stress, reduced social interaction, anxiety and difficulty maintaining learning routines	Mental health impact; isolation; academic disruption	Redefinition of presence; learning as solitary performance; effectiveness as relational judgment
Watermeyer et al. (2021)	UK universities; empirical study of academic staff digital disruption	Academics described loss of control, work intensification, altered professional roles and mediated interaction	Digital disruption; professional role change; emergency online migration	Forced transition as identity disruption; redefinition of presence; effectiveness as relational judgment

S4. Verified evidence anchors

The anchors below tie each interpretive claim to a located passage in the primary source. Direct quotations are limited to passages whose wording and location were checked against primary full texts or publisher article pages.

Retained study	Evidence type	Verbatim extract	Located in primary source	Use in synthesis
Aguilera-Hermida (2020)	Author-reported mixed-methods evidence	“Quantitative and qualitative data”	Publisher page, Abstract; IJEDRO, article 100011	Confirms qualitative material relevant to acceptance of emergency online learning
Almaiah et al. (2020)	Methodological evidence from full text	“interview method using thematic analysis”	Education and Information Technologies, p. 1, Abstract	Confirms qualitative interview/thematic evidence on barriers to e-learning system use
Mishra et al. (2020)	Author-reported mixed-methods evidence	“both quantitative and qualitative approach”	Publisher page, Abstract; IJEDRO, article 100012	Confirms mixed-methods evidence on online teaching-learning during lockdown
Rahiem (2020)	Source-location anchor	Not applicable	IJLTER article landing page and DOI-linked record	Supports the audit trail without adding an unlocated quotation
Simamora (2020)	Author-reported second-order evidence	“anxiety during online learning”	Studies in Learning and Teaching, Abstract, pp. 86-103	Anchors affective insecurity in student essays
Son et al. (2020)	First-order student evidence from full text	“lack of in-person interactions”	JMIR, Results, Increased Social Isolation, p. 8	Supports social isolation and redefinition of presence
Son et al. (2020)	Second-order author-reported evidence	“lack of in-person support”	JMIR, Results, Increased Class Workload, p. 9	Supports solitary learning and self-management burden
Watermeyer et al. (2021)	First-order academic evidence from full text	“mechanical and impersonal”	Higher Education, Afflictions section, p. 9	Supports identity disruption and deprofessionalization under emergency migration
Watermeyer et al. (2021)	First-order academic evidence from full text	“tinder box of stress”	Higher Education, Afflictions section, p. 10	Supports intensified workload and constrained acceptance among academics

S5. Reciprocal translation matrix

This matrix records how concepts were translated across studies before being synthesized into third-order constructs. It summarizes conceptual relationships and tensions rather than counting frequencies.

Cross-study concept	Contributing studies	Reciprocal translation	Tension or contrast	Third-order construct
Disrupted academic roles and routines	Mishra et al. (2020); Rahiem (2020); Simamora (2020); Watermeyer et al. (2021)	Teacher and student accounts converged around rapid role change, loss of familiar routines and altered expectations for teaching and learning	Teachers emphasized professional disruption; students emphasized loss of campus-based learning routines	Forced transition as identity disruption
Affordance-constraint tension	Aguilera-Hermida (2020); Almaiah et al. (2020); Mishra et al. (2020)	Flexibility and continuity were translated against technical barriers, platform dependence and support limitations	Online tools enabled access while also producing stress and dependence	Technological ambivalence
Mediated presence and interaction loss	Rahiem (2020); Son et al. (2020); Watermeyer et al. (2021)	Presence was translated across accounts of mediated communication, weakened informal interaction, altered participation cues and the need for intentional teaching presence	Connection did not necessarily produce social or pedagogical presence	Redefinition of presence
Individualized learning burden	Rahiem (2020); Simamora (2020); Son et al. (2020)	Student accounts translated into a shared pattern of self-regulation, isolation, motivation difficulties and reduced peer learning	Autonomy appeared both as flexibility and as unsupported individual responsibility	Learning as solitary performance
Judging effectiveness through context	Aguilera-Hermida (2020); Mishra et al. (2020); Simamora (2020); Son et al. (2020); Watermeyer et al. (2021)	Effectiveness was translated as a situated judgment shaped by support, interaction, emotional experience, institutional communication and comparison with face-to-face learning	Academic continuity did not necessarily mean perceived pedagogical quality	Effectiveness as relational judgment
Normalization without full endorsement	Aguilera-Hermida (2020); Almaiah et al. (2020); Rahiem (2020)	Repeated online learning practices were translated as pragmatic adaptation rather than unambiguous acceptance	Use and acceptance were not equivalent; continued participation could coexist with dissatisfaction	Habit as constrained adaptation

S6. Worked reciprocal translation example

From isolation to learning as solitary performance. This worked example makes the translation logic and the retained tensions explicit for one third-order construct.

Analytic step	Source-specific material	Translation across studies	Tension or refutation retained	Contribution to the line-of-argument
1. Rahiem as starting concept	Student accounts of emergency remote learning in Indonesian higher education; qualitative material on participation under crisis conditions	Isolation was interpreted as constrained participation: students remained enrolled and technically connected, but the social and emotional conditions of learning were weakened	The evidence does not imply rejection of online learning; students could continue learning while describing the experience as isolating and difficult	Crisis constraint creates participation without full pedagogical endorsement
2. Translation through Son et al.	Interview-survey evidence from U.S. college students; qualitative accounts linked to stress, motivation, routine disruption and reduced social contact	Isolation was translated into emotional and motivational burden: solitude became a self-regulation problem under uncertainty	Son et al. foreground mental-health strain more than distance education design; this limits direct pedagogical inference but strengthens the affective dimension	Limited alternatives lead students to comply while experiencing reduced motivation and emotional non-endorsement

3. Translation through Simamora	Student accounts of online learning challenges; qualitative material on interaction, access, learning difficulty and technological constraints	Isolation was translated into solitary performance: learners managed access, participation, understanding and motivation with less immediate peer or teacher support	Not all difficulties were social; some were infrastructural or instructional, so the translation retains a distinction between social isolation and practical constraint	Pragmatic compliance becomes routinized when students continue performing learning tasks despite constrained support
4. Refutational check with staff evidence	Mishra et al. and Watermeyer et al. provide accounts of rapid online transition, instructional adaptation, workload and attempts to sustain presence	These accounts do not negate solitary learning; they show that teacher effort and institutional response can coexist with students' experience of reduced social presence	The tension prevents overclaiming that online learning was simply unsupported: presence was attempted but not always experienced as meaningful	Acceptance remains partial: delivery continues, but legitimacy depends on designed presence and support
5. Third-order synthesis	Cross-study translation of isolation, emotional strain, interaction loss, access difficulty and teacher adaptation	The translated construct is learning as solitary performance: students are technologically connected but carry a heightened individual burden for sustaining learning	The construct is not universal and is not a frequency claim; it is an interpretive mechanism visible across the corpus with different emphases	Solitary performance becomes one mechanism in the constrained acceptance model

S7. CASP-informed quality appraisal

CASP was used as a descriptive appraisal framework, not as a scoring instrument. No numerical rating was assigned and no study was excluded on appraisal grounds. The appraisal informed how much interpretive weight each account could carry.

Study	Aims and design	Recruitment and data collection	Reflexivity and ethics	Analysis and findings	Overall appraisal
Aguilera-Hermida (2020)	Clear focus on emergency online learning acceptance and readiness; mixed-methods design with a limited qualitative component	Higher-education student sample reported; survey with open-ended component used for qualitative evidence	Researcher positioning not reported; participant safeguards partly reported	Mixed-methods interpretation; qualitative procedure limited; relevant findings on student acceptance and adaptation	Adequate for a focused synthesis; retained with cautious use of open-ended evidence
Almaiah et al. (2020)	Clear aim on e-learning adoption challenges during COVID-19; mixed-methods survey-based design with qualitative implications	Stakeholder recruitment partly reported; qualitative detail limited, challenges extracted from reported findings	Reflexivity not reported; consent information partially reported	Analytic procedure partly reported and used cautiously; clear barriers and enabling conditions identified	Adequate but indirect qualitative depth; retained for challenge and adoption evidence only
Mishra et al. (2020)	Clear aim on teaching-learning practices during lockdown; qualitative and interpretive case-study orientation	Institutional participants and context described; interviews and qualitative accounts reported	Author position partly inferable; ethics procedures not fully detailed but low-risk educational setting	Thematic and interpretive analysis reported; relevant teacher and institutional transition findings	Good contextual qualitative contribution; retained for faculty and institutional transition evidence
Rahiem (2020)	Clear aim on emergency remote learning experience; qualitative student narrative and reflective design	Participant recruitment described sufficiently for synthesis; reflective qualitative student material reported	Positionality partially addressed through contextual account; ethics information partly reported	Qualitative interpretation of student experience reported; strong evidence on isolation, participation and adaptation	Good qualitative contribution; retained as a core student-grounded study

Simamora (2020)	Clear aim on student obstacles in online learning during COVID-19; qualitative descriptive design	Student context described; accounts of obstacles and learning conditions reported	Reflexivity not reported; permission information partially reported	Descriptive qualitative analysis of moderate depth; relevant findings on access, interaction and independent learning	Adequate; retained for obstacles and solitary-learning evidence, with limited reflexivity
Son et al. (2020)	Clear aim on student mental health and pandemic-related learning disruption; survey with open-ended qualitative responses	Recruitment and sample clearly reported; open-ended responses reported with transparent categories	Reflexivity not reported; institutional ethics approval reported	Qualitative coding reported, depth limited by survey format; relevant evidence on isolation, motivation and routine disruption	Adequate; retained cautiously as circumscribed support for affective cost, self-regulation and solitary learning
Watermeyer et al. (2021)	Clear aim on academic experience of emergency online transition; qualitative survey and interview-style academic accounts	International higher-education academic sample described; qualitative accounts and narratives reported	Positionality partly visible through interpretive framing; ethics information partly reported	Interpretive and thematic analysis reported; strong faculty evidence on performativity, workload and presence	Strong qualitative contribution; retained as principal teacher and faculty evidence

S8. Study-level micro-justification

For each retained study, the qualitative component used, the analytic procedure in the source, and the link with the three research questions. NR indicates that the source did not separately report the volume of qualitative material.

Retained study	Qualitative component and reported volume	Second-order interpretation used	Research-question linkage
Aguilera-Hermida (2020)	Open-ended student responses on the emergency move to online learning. Overall participant base reported; qualitative open-text volume NR	Acceptance is not voluntary endorsement; it appears as pragmatic acceptance shaped by readiness, motivation, perceived usefulness and lack of alternatives	RQ1 student experience; RQ2 conditions shaping acceptance; RQ3 mechanism of constrained acceptance
Almaiah et al. (2020)	Qualitative and thematic evidence on usage challenges and influencing factors. Volume NR	Technology acceptance is conditioned by infrastructural reliability and support; barriers delimit what forms of participation are possible	RQ2 institutional and technical conditions; RQ3 link from limited infrastructure to pragmatic use
Mishra et al. (2020)	Qualitative evidence on online teaching-learning during lockdown, including teacher-facing accounts. Volume NR	Legitimacy of online teaching depends on institutional support, workload realism and capacity to preserve meaningful teaching presence	RQ1 teacher experience; RQ2 pedagogical and institutional conditions; RQ3 whether emergency adaptation becomes legitimate practice
Rahiem (2020)	Qualitative student experience material on learning from home during COVID-era disruption. Volume NR	Emergency remote learning is constrained participation: students continue because alternatives are limited, while domestic conditions shape the meaning of participation	RQ1 student lived experience; RQ3 constrained acceptance through isolation, adaptation and routinized participation
Simamora (2020)	Essay-based qualitative evidence from students in a performance-oriented learning context. Essay corpus reported; extractable volume NR	Online learning is experienced as solitary performance when practical, embodied or interaction-heavy forms of learning are displaced into remote formats	RQ1 student experience in practice-oriented learning; RQ3 loss of embodied interaction and partial normalization
Son et al. (2020)	Interview-survey of college students; 195 participants; coded interview-survey responses on COVID-19 impacts	Acceptance is socially and affectively mediated: participation is inseparable from mental health, social presence and the loss of campus-based routines	RQ1 student experience; RQ3 link from affective and social disruption to constrained participation
Watermeyer et al. (2021)	Academic-staff evidence on COVID-19 digital disruption; large staff response base reported; qualitative free-text accounts used	Faculty acceptance is constrained by institutional urgency and workload pressure; digital migration may create functional continuity without full pedagogical legitimacy	RQ1 teacher experience; RQ2 institutional conditions; RQ3 from crisis pressure to routinized but contested practice

S9. Evidence anchors and refutational notes for the six mechanisms

Mechanism	Evidence anchors	Refutational or tension note	Analytic implication
1. Crisis constraint	Mishra et al. and Watermeyer et al. document rapid institutional migration to online teaching; Rahiem and Simamora document student adaptation under emergency conditions	The constraint was not experienced identically: faculty accounts emphasized workload and institutional disruption, student accounts emphasized access, motivation and isolation	The starting point of acceptance was emergency constraint, not voluntary adoption
2. Limited alternatives	Aguilera-Hermida and Rahiem show that online learning was often the available route for continuity during campus closure	Some participants valued flexibility, so constraint did not mean universal rejection	Acceptance must be read as mixed and situated rather than negative by default
3. Pragmatic compliance	Almaiah et al. and Aguilera-Hermida show system use mediated by technical barriers, support and perceived usefulness	Compliance may coexist with appreciation of continuity and access	Use does not equal endorsement; it may indicate necessity
4. Relational cost	Rahiem, Simamora and Son et al. describe solitary learning, self-regulation demands and reduced informal peer support	Staff accounts show attempts to sustain presence that did not fully remove students' solitary experience	Compliance carries a relational and affective cost that connection alone does not offset
5. Negotiated legitimacy	Aguilera-Hermida, Mishra et al. and Watermeyer et al. tie perceived effectiveness to institutional framing, comparison with face-to-face learning and available support	Institutional framing of online learning as innovation could shift difficulties onto individuals, while acknowledgment of constraints allowed ambivalence to be voiced	Partial normalization does not equal legitimacy
6. Routinization	Repeated platform use across studies produced habits and procedural familiarity	Routinization could reduce anxiety for some while intensifying fatigue or isolation for others	Habit is constrained adaptation rather than automatic acceptance, and the outcome is partial normalization without full pedagogical legitimacy