E-Learning Challenges in Saudi Arabia: Exploration of Factors with special reference to EFL

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Abstract

The development and use of online and e-learning system in many colleges are now the greatest obstacles in the field of EFL, but ones that are necessitated given the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like Blackboard, e-learning has other useful avenues to use in EFL till the time that the pandemic is over. However, the success of e-learning platforms in EFL relies on an understanding of the dynamics of the application and the main problems affecting current e-learning programs. Teachers and learners of EFL in KSA are only now recognizing the problems and variables, whose resolution alone can ensure success of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and later as an expanding horizon in foreign language learning.The aim of this paper is, therefore, to examine the major challenges posed by current e-learning systems and the key explanations for the usage of e-learning in EFL in the current circumstances. The paper used the thematic research interview approach using the NVivo development model. This was an interview with 30 EFL students and 31 e-learning specialists at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. The study results offer valuable advice for policymakers, programmers, content creators, academicans and EFL learners in identifying the key aspects of e-learning use during the COVID-19 pandemic in KSA.

Keywords: COVID 19, EFL, E-learning, Saudi, Education, Delivery Mode

Introduction

As we see in the world now, the COVID-19 pandemic forces educational institutions such as colleges to quickly move into distance learning and online learning. The EFL departments and schools were no different. COVID-19 compelled emergency electronic training throughout the world. Mankind has been caught in an emergency and there is a need to react with unique and usable learning resources like e-learning programs and mobile apps. The EFL learners in the region have had some exposure to online and distance learning, especially since the beginning of the last decade as universities welcomed MOOCs as a viable learning option to accommodate the growing numbers of EFL learners. However, COVID-19 was an immediate motivation to explore online training and learning resources in foreign language education. UNESCO (2020) states that, the closing of schools has many negative effects on education. Digital online learning systems, now, have easy internet connectivity, and the requisite quality in terms of speed and access which are needed for them to be used as learning tools. E-learning programs play a crucial role in mitigating the dire consequences of the pandemic, bringing about some sense of 'normalcy' for the learner community. E-learning programs must schedule, run, and monitor the educator's learning cycle. It also aims to encourage student education through university, and school suspension through helping schools, colleges, and universities to deliver teaching online. The development of these structures is currently healthy for effective learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the quality and use of online course material in the world of e-learning remains an important issue during the COVID-19 pandemic for various colleges. E-learning is an essential source of education, because it is universal (available everywhere), affordable, user friendly, and enjoyable. E-learning platforms, like blackboards, which have been popular with the EFL environments for some time now. It may be more realistic to use these and other tools more fully in this period given the fact that except for the physical presence of the teacher, students have an almostreal classroom experience with the features of cameras and microphones for real time interaction, an essential for a foreign language classroom. For example, students can be taught a lecture, or take part in an e-learning system training with their home teachers on a laptop, or mobile computers, communicating with the teacher or peers, and participating in real time activities.

Students may also use the handheld device to access instructional content, as they can be wired to telephone, or local wireless networks. Ülker and Yılmaz (2016) announced that, Learning Management System (LMS) is an e-learning alternative. E-learning involves e-learning events, including student enrollment, training, mission, class-related knowledge, planning of courses, material, curricula, and applicable classes (Haghshenas 2019). With the shift from mainstream schooling, students can become increasingly open to e-learning platforms, such as the Blackboard around-the-counter, providing a number of benefits, including increasing the consistency and productivity of schools by improved interactions with their teachers; and exposure to learning resources (Idris and Osman 2015).

Although students are willing to adopt the software (Almaiah & Alismaiel, 2019; Almaiah & Jalil, 2014; Shawai & Almaiah, 2018), the scarcity of e-learning services keeps students hard up from recognizing its benefits (AlmaiahAl-Khasawneh, 2020). This enhances the depletion and lack of academic funds (Naveed et al . 2017). However, research are pending and the opinions of students are not extended (Tarhini, Al-Busaidi, Mohammed and Maqableh, 2017; Almaiah and Alamri 2018). E-learning helps colleges to take into consideration the expectations of their students and effectively establish a functional e-learning environment (El-Masri and Tarhini, 2017; Alksasbeh, Abuhelaleh & Almaiah, 2019). Apart from these few studies rooted in e-learning under 'normal' circumstances, the effectiveness of the same or the obstacles encountered under special conditions such as those imposed by Covid19 pandemic, have not been researched in KSA. What makes the case of KSA a special one are three factors: i. Limited e-learning exposure of learners in the region; ii. Recent adoption of MOOCs by universities in the region; iii. Limited availability of EFL courses under the MOOCs or any other e-learning platform. It may be noted that e-learning systems were implemented around three years ago in a series of traditional models. The main problems and consequences of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic are explored in this report.

Literature Review

E-Learning Usage
Any system's performance is based on the user's device usage (Almaiah, 2018). It follows that, the student e-learning assistance is one of the key factors in the performance of the e-learning system.

Many reports also addressed issues about the introduction of e-learning in several countries worldwide. For instance, Al-Rahmi et al. (Almaiah& Man, 2016) used the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to analyze important factors, which influence the usage in Malaysia of the Malaysian e-learning program. Relative advantages, observability, schooling, accessibility, difficulty, and a sense of fun are the variables crucial to selecting students to use the e-learning program of Malaysia. In a detailed analysis, Salloum,Al-Emran, Shaalan, and Tarhini (2019) using a case study from the United Arab Emirates. Four factors (innovation, training, trust, and common knowledge) were found to increase students' acceptance of the e-learning framework. Al-Gahtani (2016) examined the effects of e-learning for TAM graduates. He considered playfulness, self-performance, and flexibility as the most important considerations for e-learning through the usage of machines, social power expectations, community principles, and future benefits. The social influence, protesters, and assumed good fortune in Saudi Arabia, however, did not render e-learning programs more appropriate. According to Almaiah and Almulhem (2018), and Almaiah, Jalil, and Man (2016a), the Delphi approach may be used to assess growth drivers for the online learning programs launched by Saudi Arabia. The findings highlight 11 key factors in four areas: website functionality, layout decisions, encouragement for top management, and academics and learning and e-learning.

In almost the same context, Bellaaj, Zekri, and Albugami(2015) used a standard functional application and usage concept description in order to review the factors that have an effect on the extent of the usage of e-learning services by students at Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia. They noticed that, creativity and achievement have a powerful influence on e-learning adoption. While operating in Azerbaijan, Chang,Hajiyev, and Su (2017) utilize e-learning as a tool of societal norms, knowledge, and satisfaction. The facets of TAM e-learning adoption have, nevertheless, been discussed by Abdullah and Ward (2016). In this study, autonomy, societal aspirations, enjoyment, discomfort, and experience with machine usage play a key role in e-learning for students. Similarly, Alhabeeb and Rowley (2017) indicated that, telecommunication, IT, and education personnel competences are essential to improving e-learning performance at Saudi Arabian universities.While numerous e-learning studies are being conducted, the present study, nevertheless, attempts to refer to the literature analyzing the major obstacles and influences in Saudi Arabia, which can be inspired by the positive development of e-learning.

Challenges of E-learning

There is no doubt that e-learning in both developing and developed countries is a challenge for both learners and teachers. Perhaps more daunting is the willingness to take e-learning and to use it as an effective and constructive literary tool in developed countries (Almaiah, Jalil & Man, 2016b). Our latest literature review deals with several questions which are relevant to the application of the system for e-learning. It was debated if these issues could be grouped into four study groups: technological, individual, cultural and educational. We found that the problems from one country to another were very different, mainly due to variations of cultures , backgrounds and stages of growth. E-learning difficulties related primarily to the lack of ICT awareness, low development of networks and a small output of material in developed countries (Aung and Khaing 2015). A recent study has shown that access, internet literacy and computer productivity in Pakistan are significant problems as the e-learning system is being implemented successfully (Kanwal and Rehman 2017). A similar study in Kenya has established three major issues in e-learning: a shortage in technical know-how, financial resources and ICT potential (Tarus, Gichoya and Muumbo, 2015). Some other studies (Kisanga and Ireson, 2015; Mulhanga and Lima, 2017) highlighted insufficient equipment facilities as a primary challenge for the effective execution of current e-learning initiatives owing to a shortage of technological resources and IT expertise. In addition, Mulhanga and Lima (2017) stated that social , political and economic constraints are the key factors in Libya's e-learning framework. Chen and Tseng (2012) categorize learning problems into four different groups, namely interpersonal constraints, the complexities of technology and cultural concerns.

Despite these initiatives, none of these studies addressed the concrete challenges confronting e-learning users of EFL. Consequently, Araibi, Naz'ri Bin Mahrin, and Yusoff (2019) studied the key criteria for the e-learning system performance, attributing to technical challenges 45% of overall failures, 40% of partial failures, and just 15% successful. Based on this and other research works, many IS / IT students have investigated the mechanisms of effective e-learning integration (Al-Araibi *et al*., 2019; Esterhuyse and Scholtz, (2015); Islam, Beer, and Slack, (2015). There are many examples, which demonstrate the reasons why the students do not choose to use new technologies (Almaiah & Al Mulhem, (2019); Al-Khasawneh and Obeidallah, 2019). There is yet another issue, which needs addressing; namely, restricted usage and recognition. Longitudinal research are also crucial to finding significant hurdles to e-learning in a context fraught with the

COVID-19 pandemic, in order to assist decision makers in solving the question of the inadequate utilization of e-learning in this field. The present research was carried out in Saudi universities. Such colleges are introducing the e-learning framework for supplying their EFL students with online learning courses. The questions in the interview are structured to gather data from students and professionals, who already use e-learning in such universities. These universities may, then, help us achieve the study target.

Research Questions

This study, generally, investigates the challenges of e-learning in EFL in Saudi Arabia. It, specifically, aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the core challenges of e-learning in EFL, especially in a context beset with the COVID-19 pandemic?; and (2) What are the key factors impacting the successful usage of the e-learning for learning a foreign language? In the first section of this investigation, we concentrate on related studies on the application of the e-learning system on learning of English, and on the nuances of the e-learning method. This will include a reference to the techniques for research, data analysis, and data assessment. We, then, examine the experiments, and, ultimately, the inconveniences and conclusions.

Methodology

Research Design

The research method of this study involves three main steps. In phase 1, we reviewed the available literature for the variables and challenges in the implementation of e-learning in EFL. In phase 2, a thematic analysis was employed to identify and explain, e-learning variables and difficulties as seen in EFL. The qualitative knowledge obtained during the interview was analyzed with the thematic analysis of the NVivo testing methods. For the thematic research process of this typ of study, Braun and Clarke (2006) have identified five-stage projects, including the aggregation of results, the creation of initial codes, thematic analysis, identification and naming of topics, and the final report production. In the third phase, the main challenges and factors are to be identified for e-learning adoption in EFL. The following sections address in depth the data-collection process, the sample analysis, and the data processing strategies used in this study.

Research Subjects

A total of 61 participants were asked with their technical background as technology specialists, to make the study more representative. These comprised of 30 EFL learners, 25 language and ICT workers, and 6 online content developers. In qualitative research, sample size according to Quick and Hall (2015) is usually between 4 and 50 due to the huge volume of data collected. The research focuses on adequacy (participants) and suitability (data collected). Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested the interviews would be fully prolonged for 5 to 6 hours. Nevertheless, researchers are used to help lobby, and to comment on the topic. The findings ought to be appropriate and specifically described in facts (Howell 2003). Consequently, 30 students and 31 e-learning specialists were requested for the interview, and this number sufficiently fulfilled the criteria of the sample size of the analysis (Quick and Hall 2015; Howell 2003).

Procedure

This was a qualitative study based on data collection and evaluation via semi-structured interview method. For this analysis, the qualitative approach was used to analyze participant data in order to produce a case study, rather than simply list numerical results.

Interviews

The participants did not take a specific question list during the semi-structured interview, but were offered a set of general topics called an interview guide. This approach helped us engage the interviewees more, and collect more details using the Skype program given the social distancing norms prevalent in KSA. The online interviews with 30 EFL students were conducted over a period of five days and the questions centred around the Blackboard program with which the Saudi EFL learners are somewhat familiar. The interview was based on many issues resulting from the core research goals of the group and the problems discussed included different concerns relating to the usage of the e-learning method for EFL during COVID-19 pandemic, and the key difficulties they faced through the implementation of the COVID-19 e-learning system. The interviews with the 31 professionals were telephonic as these were fitted in between the free slots they availed as these people were all working from home at the time of the study.

Results and Discussion

Qualitative data is analyzed utilizing the thematic analysis software of NVivo during the interview. The main goal of this method was to obtain valid data from the study topic. It can be used to render more comprehensive findings and predictions (Denscombe 2010). In this review, five steps according to Braun and Clarke (2006) were established for the phase of detailed analysis: awareness of data, development of initial codes, the quest for themes, the recognition, naming and preparation of the final report. The description of the subject was an integral element derived from research-related evidence. During the thematic analysis , the researcher split the data from the interviewees into three components with NVivo 10 subjectively. The NVivo coding approach started with descriptive coding as described by Morse and Richard (Watts 2008), followed by words, terms and phrases from a data transcript that established the related words surrounding e-learning difficulties and problems. NVivo calls the 'Letter text references nodes' codes (Almaiah 2018) and adds to the collection of references for a particular subject, genre or area of interest (Almaiah 2018). (Almaiah 2018) Several sub-themes can be mentioned for each specific issue, based on the study topic.

For the chosen coding analysis , researchers clustered the findings of interviews on the key global classifications, i.e. unique subjects, e-learning variables and problems created by usage of e-learning in EFL during COVID-19. The interviews were recorded in video using the Samsung, S8 + study. After the interview, the debriefing was done so that participants could ask concerns, answer or provide information that was not addressed during the interview. All interviews were then transcribed. The materials analyzed included the interview transcripts and the interview notes. The auditor reviewed the documents for the information on the mobile computer more than once and that, where appropriate, the same words used by the person challenged were ensured and updated. This process was critical before the coding, after reading the whole text section. The categories were coded according to the transcript of the interviewee obtained during this point.

 Observations of the key problems confronting e-learning in EFL during COVID-19

This part includes thematic results that contribute to the discovery of the key problems that EFL learners encountered in the use of electronic education systems.

Management Problems

As the interviewees have noticed, changing governments is one of the hurdles, as it has an impact on governance guidelines and policies, students and instructors. As the interviewees said, *"We think that, this is a challenge, because the University is experiencing substantial resistance to the adaptation of current circumstances; and will, thus, be approached with caution about any changes."* Students, or teachers, prefer the traditional learning and teaching cycle in EFL as it offers them greater scope for real time language exposure, including the surasegmental and paralanguage aspects of it. The interviewees affirmed that, *"Some students and teachers are still reluctant to utilize the e-learning platform, because many students distrust the learning tools of the system, such as applications, tests, and so on, also because they have their pre-conceived notions about the difficulty of learning a foreign language using the purely online method. This issue affects teachers who think the move would threaten their work, because of the shift from traditional methods to modern methods."* The finding of the management problems on e-learning implementation has been acknowledged by previous studies (Abdalmenem, Abu-Naser, Al Shobaki& Abu Amuna, 2019a; Lee, Song, & Hong, 2019; Poór, et al, 2019; Vershitskaya, Mikhaylova, Gilmanshina, Dorozhkin & Epaneshnikov 2020).

Technical Problems

All respondents acknowledged that, the technological aspect for the EFL e-learning program is one of the key problems, which needs to be tackled, as it might hinder the implementation of the framework by many students. The experts outlined that, *"The present e-learning program in EFL has certain possible challenges in terms of openness, affordability, reliability, and the consistency of the e-learning service."* The interviewees made it clear that, "It is clear that, if the student believes that the e-learning program is simple to use, pleasant to operate on, and leads to the expected proficiency level in English, then he thinks the program is beneficial, and would boost his or her efficiency and prospects." The researchers recommended that, the e-learning program in English as a Foreign Language courses be implemented more effectively in order to ensure the performance of the user in terms of his or her willingness to utilize it. We, therefore, conclude that, *"There is a challenge, because students' schooling is special, their exposure to English as a language is limited and has been in a teacher-centred direction, the e-learning program is not convenient for certain students to use, so that is why the university is searching for a way to make*

it easier to use as that aspect plays the main role in enhancing proficiency in English, thus making students feel that using e-learningin EFL courses is useful."

Financial Constraint

All respondents indicated that, financing is an obstacle for e-learning enterprises, because Saudi universities have a limited resource, and a high budget deficit. As interviewees pointed out, *"Economic issues, such as the current budget gap will deter certain projects, as the Saudi Budget is the key source of funding for* universities.

Detection of important variables impacting the usage of e-learning in EFL courses during the pandemic COVID-19

This segment contains contextual observations that describe the main factors impacting the effective usage of e-learning systems. The findings indicate that, (1) technical factors, (2) success factors of e-learning programs, (3) confidence factors, (4) self-effective factors, and (5) cultural factors are essential problems, which should be addressed, and overcome in potential planning.

Technological Reasons

According to respondents, *"technology considerations are one of the considerations required to make an e-learning program in foreign language efficient." "Throughout the implementation process, every technical consideration should be weighed,"* as one expert said. For example, even though universities do have the equipment and software to support the e-learning of foreign languages, they may not have the technical expertise to utilize the software, or the technology, that may lead to a mistake. One such example is of the Langauge Labs available in some places. Though all the paraphernalia and technology exist in these, the requisite espertise is missing as teachers are not sufficienty trained to use these labs. Experts have also highlighted the fact that, *"e-learning is available through physical resources, such as computers, servers, and networks;"* in addition, *"computer programs and operating systems are completely required for usage."*

E-learning system quality Indicators

For opinions on important factors in the implementation of the e-learning system in Saudi universities, the main focus of the expert opinion is on the feasibility and efficiency of the e-learning system in ensuring and measuring the achievement of espected language proficiency in

English. Respondents unanimously agreed that, "The current EFL e-learning systems have some possible barriers to accessibility, usability, and affordability, particularly for people with minimal internet experience." This view is being shared by many experts and universities, and is highly advised to be taken seriously; for it may pose an impediment to their acceptance of technology in the first place. Yet, another analyst said that, 'The success of the e-learning system will be focused on happiness and individuality of the student.'

Students, without great programming abilities, have been invited to clarify their thoughts on the current e-learning software in EFL courses. "The new tech is not easy to use for anyone lacking programming know-how, and can not contribute to machine failure," interviewees said. "Essentially, the current e-learning framework is not flexible," as Expert 3 said. Consequently, more than the language (English), the students end up spending time on learning the useof the software.

Participants (Expert 1 and Expert 2), too, said: "*The correlation between user-friendly usage and program adoption is important, as if it becomes challenging for students to use and they tend to lose their faith in the process.*" Expert 1 continued by saying that, the software is about how easy it is for a person to use the system. "The capability cannot be separated from the functionality of the device owing to my familiarity with numerous Information systems. Additionally, the consumer may believe that, there is no effort for utilizing the app.

Cultural Factors

The respondents state that, community is a crucial element in growing the students' usage of the e-learning curriculum: "Social concerns are one of the key issues to enable the full use of the e-learning curriculaby more students." ICT literacy is one of the main topics considered by the Higher Education board, as experts contend: "The increase in ICT literacy, and online learning, is one of the factors to improve the use of the e-learning system." In fact, experts have described education as a very significant goal for the 2025 dream of Education. Further, proficiency of the Saudi populace in English is one of the stated goals of the Saudi Vision 2020 and 2030. According to the experts,

"E-society should bring all schools together to create a common e-learning agency." Another significant aspect is the participation in Saudi core technologies and forum with students in various

social media. Social networking applications are the perfect place to reach people. Social networking would allow universities to react differently to students, increase student engagement and thereby boost the e-learning climate.

Self-efficacy Domains

As the respondents pointed out, self-efficacy is one of the main determinants in adopting the e-learning curriculum. The experts have said: "To increase the implementation of an e-learning scheme, it is important that, students in Saudi universities have a high degree of self-efficiency or, in other words, a high degree of motivation to carry out the appropriate tasks even without teacher or peer support. Instead, if students have a low degree of self-efficiency, it is difficult to accomplish learning activities in an e-learning framework." Learning a foreign language is in itself an onerous task, added to this the stress of unfamiliar technology can create some serious obstacles in learning. The respondents indicated that, "Training programs in self-directed EFL study would play a significant role for students, as well as, for teachers to reach a high degree of auto-performance; and universities should also develop these training programs so as to boost their IT capacities; and, hence, continue to adopt the electronic learning process."

Factors of Confidence

"Trust is a significant consideration for raising Saudi universities' rate of adoption of the e-learning program in EFL courses," the respondents said. "Universities are still seeking to ensure that, the e-learning system is trustworthy," they asserted. The dimension of trust involves computer protection, information honesty, and machine reliability in ensuring measurable language success for the students. "To allow students more likely to embrace e-learning, it is important that, colleges continuously update the security systems, and ensure that, the software is completely secured from all kinds of malware; and that, all research activities are lawfully performed on the grounds of the regulations and privacy rules."

Conclusion

The development and use of the online and e-learning system in EFL courses in many colleges are, now, the greatest obstacles in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like Blackboard, e-learning has other useful resources to use in this period of crisis. However, the design of the e-

learning platform in EFL relies on an understanding of the dynamics of the application and the main problems affecting current e-learning programs and learner needs. The crucial problems and variables, which enable successful use of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, have not been accepted. This study sought to examine the key challenges of current e-learning systems in EFL and to investigate the immense possibilities that exist unused in this direction. The interview approach was used to perform thematic analyzes using the NVivo development model. The outcomes of the study offer a valuable guide for policymakers, programmers, engineers and academics in properly recognizing the key implications of the usage of e-learning in EFL during the COVID-19 pandemic. As is quite apparent, this paper discusses significant issues concerning the effects on the usage of the e-learning method in EFL during the COVID-19 pandemic. This technique encompasses not all areas typically addressed within the e-learning system; and, hence, the findings include a fresh research methodology to promoting successful utilization of the e-learning curriculum not only in the current but also times to come. The findings of this study are likely to be useful to university decision-makers, planners, and academicians in these institutions. They give a good view of the current e-learning landscape, which can be seen as a reference for successful usage by students in e-learning programs. The findings show that there are three major obstacles preventing the use of the e-learning system: (1) issues linked to transition of management; (2) technical problems related to the e-learning system in EFL courses.

Implications

An additional advantage for current literature in this study may be viewed as the primary barriers to the effective usage of the e-learning method in the COVID 19 pandemic. Such research gives valuable realistic perspectives on how e-learning in EFL is utilized, and implemented in countries such as Saudi Arabia. In addition to the technical problems found during previous studies, several subjects, such as e-learning, progress monitoring, course design, self-efficiency, and financial assistance, are discussed (Almaiah and Almulhem, 2018; Almaiah and Alyoussef, 2019; Eltahir, 2019; Chen and Tseng, 2012). The research results will provide decision-makers, researchers, creators, and observers with valuable recommendations to better grasp the main facets of the e-learning system's implementation. Second, university management and technical support will include the institutional tools needed to continue e-learning services in EFL in the implementation phase, as significant changes in the operation of the e-learning framework need tremendous and

consistent access to e-learning material. University administration must also include the required software, apps, and internet connectivity to ensure best outcomes for the student community. Universities may effectively provide online learning in foreign languages, because they are continuously updating their technology resources, teachers and students. Third, the developers of e-learning systems for EFL studies can build a user-friendly, easy-to-use e-learning platform, because it will quickly be implemented if students and teachers find the e-learning system convenient to use. Fourth, educational institutions in Saudi Arabia will follow the applicable policies, and regulations so as to enable students and teachers to incorporate the e-learning program in EFL courses. Therefore, a range of reforms in education policies will be introduced to prepare for a seamless transition from mainstream to e-learning. Via the usage of the teaching structure, the top management guidelines, the curriculum programs, and the university rules, such changes may be made. Fifth, the findings will enable university administrations to concentrate on instruction on increased comprehension, and expertise for teachers; because teachers play asignificant role in motivating students to use the e-learning program, which impacts efficiently the consistency of their teaching, as well as their profitability. Sixth, school systems should focus on the importance of e-learning services in EFL by preparing, and improving their capabilities in both language and technology and the synthesis of the two. Students, with adequate programming ability and constructive attitudes towards the application of the e-learning program in learning of a foreign language, should be motivated to effectively incorporate the e-learning system. The results of this report will provide officials with fresh ideas and advice to ensure that, e-learning programs are effectively utilized in a COVID-19 pandemic.

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