AN EXAMINATION OF PERCEPTIONS REGARDING ONLINE STUDENT COMMUNITIES: A METAPHORICAL ANALYSIS FOR LEARNERS AND GRADUATES OF OPEN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to determine the metaphorical ideas held by learners/graduates who engage in online student communities within the Anadolu University Open and Distance Education System, specifically with the concept of "online student communities". The study utilized a qualitative research methodology, specifically employing the phenomenology design, which is a well-established qualitative research strategy. The research sample consists of 637 students/graduates who are associated with student groups of the Anadolu University Open Education System. The acquired data underwent scrutiny through the content analysis method. The study revealed that participants evaluated online communities by taking into account multiple features instead of relying on a single notion. Hence, the metaphors used by individuals in virtual student communities were categorized into seven main groupings. The aforementioned areas include the exchange and generation of information, social connections, hobbies, advantages and life experiences, communication and engagement, technology, and monotony or boredom. After examining the participant responses on metaphors related to online student communities and their motivations, it became clear that the participants had positive views on acquiring information, building social connections, facilitating communication and interaction with other students and alumni, as well as personal enjoyment and benefits.

Keywords: Online communities, open and distance learning, educational institutions and metaphor analysis.

INTRODUCTION

A community is a group of individuals who are connected through their relationships, common activities, cognitive patterns, and shared ideals and values (Biza et al. 2014, p. 162). Pappas (2016) emphasizes the innate human desire to be part of a community and emphasizes the capacity of online learning communities to meet the needs of online learners and provide support, regardless of individual differences such as personal goals, previous personal-professional experiences, or physical limitations such as distance.

Within the domain of information and communication technology, contemporary communities are characterized as groups of individuals with shared interests who come together to exchange information and collaborate on solving problems (Luo, Zhang, and Qi, 2017). Presently, the previously described communities, popularly known as online communities or virtual communities, are generally defined as Internet communities or web communities. Within these communities, individuals predominantly interact with each other via digital platforms, creating a unified entity resembling a "virtual family of companions" (Cevrimici Topluluk,

2022). The notion of online community, as delineated by Rheingold (1993), refers to interpersonal networks formed in the digital domain. It includes online platforms that allow communication using digital methods. This term refers to various types of computer-mediated communication among large groups of individuals who exchange information, pursue their interests, engage in conversations, and have the ability to facilitate a wide range of activities related to seeking, providing, and sharing information. Moreover, online communities also function as platforms for socializing and other forms of engagement (Burnett, 2000).

An online community refers to a collective of persons who are linked over the internet and share common goals, interests, and experiences (Davidson-Shivers, Rasmussen, & Lowenthal, 2018). Online communities have various functions beyond simply sharing information and resources. Additionally, they function as social environments that satisfy individuals' social requirements (Rothaermel and Sugiyama, 2001, p. 299). Furthermore, these communities serve to enable commercial endeavors, provide psychological assistance, and deliver amusement (Phang, Kankanhalli and Sabherwal, 2009). In addition, they facilitate "conversations" that allow participants to get socio-emotional support and engage in a dynamic exchange of knowledge (Burnet, 2000). The main impetus for individuals to join online communities is frequently ascribed to their need for access to and exchange of information, as substantiated by several research studies. The dissemination of information inside online communities is essential for understanding the underlying dynamics of those communities. The viability of any online community relies on the exchange of information. The dissemination of knowledge among participants of an internet-based community is widely recognized as a vital and indispensable process (Butler, 2001). In their study, Ridings and Gefen (2004) investigated the underlying reasons for individuals' engagement in virtual communities. Their research revealed that individuals participate in online communities for several purposes, such as exchanging information, seeking social support, fostering friendships, and seeking entertainment. Moreover, the researchers observed that these motives may vary based on the particular category of society under examination.

From an educational institution's standpoint, online communities offer a valuable chance to enhance the learning process by providing access to educational resources and facilitating dynamic interactions between educators and students. Consequently, this helps to foster continuous involvement in the process of acquiring knowledge. As to the research conducted by Wachter, Gupta, and Quaddus (2000), the main goal of education is to cultivate a student's learning experience that goes beyond the limitations of a certain course, hence encouraging continuous learning throughout their lives. The writers emphasize the need to provide a wider range of materials in order to achieve this objective. Therefore, online communities provide several prospects for educational institutions in this aspect.

The creation of virtual communities in the context of open and distance learning is highly crucial as it enables many types of communication, such as interactions between learners, learners and instructors, and learners and institutions. These online communities function as platforms for sharing knowledge and cultivating social relationships among persons who are physically far from one other. Several open and distance education platforms provide students the opportunity to foster closer connection by creating specialized groups or communities. Students can partake in specialized groups focused on specific academic areas or interact with like-minded folks who have similar interests. Student clubs, considered as online communities in the context of open and distance learning, were created to improve students' social involvement, facilitate interactions with similar individuals, and promote a favorable learning environment.

Anadolu University is a known distance education institution in Turkiye that provides students with the opportunity to participate in various activities through virtual platforms called "Online Student Communities" within the Open Education System. The Open Education System Online Student Communities platform offers a dynamic virtual environment where students can participate in meaningful activities, regardless of their geographical location. At present, the platform accommodates eight "Online Student Communities," which have gained growing importance in 2021.

These communities play a crucial role in fostering continuous learning and enabling students to acquire the essential skills and knowledge for personal growth. Anadolu University's Online Student Communities program has successfully reached a substantial number of students, totaling 616,524. The Book Society has a total of 143,284 members, whilst the Photography Society has a total of 101,435 members. The Informatics Society has amassed a total of 86,848 individuals, while the Cinema Society has a slightly higher number of members with 96,171. The History Society boasts a membership of 78,126, whereas the Music Society has

garnered the interest of 64,572 persons. The Sociology Society boasts a substantial membership of 39,204, while the Design Society has the most modest membership, consisting of 6,884 members. These communities have effectively created social and interactive environments to promote participation among their members. Every month, several communities invite specialists in specific fields to participate in their activities, allowing community members to actively participate. Online events provide students with the chance to participate in interactive discussions with both their classmates and invited guests using a designated discussion platform. In addition, pupils have the potential to obtain diverse rewards by delivering precise answers to the questions presented to them. If desired, it is also possible to simultaneously participate in multiple communities. As per the Anadolu University e-newspaper (2022), the official website ekampus.anadolu.edu.tr and the university's social media accounts are where all event announcements are made. Furthermore, these occurrences are recorded for individuals who desire to retrieve them at a subsequent moment.

This study suggests that using metaphors to evaluate the perceptions of individuals who are currently enrolled or have graduated from Anadolu University Open and Distance Education System, regarding the established student communities and their motivations for working together, is valuable for conducting a comprehensive analysis of the perspectives held by the community members.

Metaphor is the cognitive process by which an individual understands and interprets a certain reality by connecting it to a separate occurrence (Lakoff & Johnson, 2005). Metaphors are seen as tools of the mind used to partially understand complex phenomena that are difficult to grasp, including sensory perception, personal knowledge, spiritual awareness (Lakoff and Johnson, 2005), and cognitive processes that help us better understand past experiences (Zhao, Coombs and Zahoa, 2010). Metaphors offer a flexible and ever-changing structure that can be understood by everyone. They allow individuals to express their fears, hopes, and commitments (Wyatt, 2021). Therefore, metaphors offer appropriate structures for distinguishing individual interpretations. Metaphors have the ability to influence people's thinking about a specific topic by creating and spreading discussions on important issues (Thibodeau, 2016). Furthermore, metaphors can aid learners in attaining a thorough understanding of issues that they have not extensively investigated. Metaphors are mental structures that function at a higher level of cognition. They act as frameworks that shape and define past experiences through analogical connections, making it easier to create meanings. Metaphors are considered excellent tools for gaining insights into topics that are not consciously known (Amin, 2015).

According to contemporary metaphor theory, it is suggested that metaphor is the basis of the conceptual framework used in language, as well as in cognitive processes and behavioral patterns (Aksehirli, 2007). Metaphors have a crucial role in clarifying the fundamental structures and concepts by amplifying the intentions, temporal features, circumstances, transformations, and rationales within this framework.

The current literature extensively examines numerous research that have explored the phenomenon of metaphors and their use as a tool to assess persons' perceptions in various academic fields. Metaphors have also been utilized in educational studies. Jensen (2006) asserts that metaphor analysis is a viable qualitative research method in the realm of education, with substantial pertinence to both educational theory and practice. Metaphors are often used in educational research to gain comprehensive insights on learners. Metaphor analysis is frequently used in qualitative research to achieve three main goals: improving the procedural aspects, clarifying the procedural dynamics, and understanding the resulting outcomes. The use of metaphors in qualitative research is aimed at clarifying the process, while their use in clarifying the conclusion is suggested as a logical technique for assessing the complex semantic frameworks of research by incorporating ideas from other disciplines (Gunes and Firat, 2016, p. 121).

According to Meyer (2005), metaphors are useful tools for understanding the viewpoints of distance learners towards different processes. Several studies have been undertaken and published in the existing literature on distance education, including works by Civril, Arugaslan, and Ozkara (2018), Yilmaz and Guven (2015), Bagriacik Yilmaz (2019), Usta (2019), and Aksoy, Bozkurt, and Kursun (2021). Metaphor analysis is a valuable instrument in open and distance learning for evaluating the perspectives of different stakeholders on the concepts within this domain. This enables a comprehensive analysis of the viewpoints held by various target demographics about the structure, functioning, system, learning settings, instructors, and the institution as a whole (Gunes and Firat, 2016). The use of metaphors and their subsequent analysis in the context of open and distance learning allows learners to cultivate their own expressions and viewpoints, hence facilitating outcomes that prioritize the individual (Gunes and Firat, 2016, p. 121). Thus, it is crucial

to evaluate the current situation in order to improve the effectiveness of online student communities, which have developed as a new entity in the field of open and distance education. This assessment will enable the creation of an operational, student-focused, and collaborative online community.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this research is to determine the metaphorical understandings held by learners/graduates who engage in online student communities within the open and distance education system, specifically with the concept of "online student communities".

To achieve this main goal, investigations were conducted to obtain answers to the following questions:

1. Which metaphors do learners/graduates use to conceptualize "online student communities"?
2. What conceptual categories can be used to classify metaphors related to "online student communities" based on their shared attributes?

METHOD

The study utilized a qualitative research approach to examine the viewpoints of students and alumni associated with Anadolu University Open Education System online student communities regarding their encounters with these virtual communities. The study was carried out using the phenomenology design, a qualitative research methodology.

Phenomenology, as defined by Wilson (2015, p.38), is a qualitative research methodology that emerged from a philosophical movement. It functions as a medium for individuals to express their feelings, opinions, understandings, and perceptions about a certain phenomena or topic. This strategy is used to clarify how individuals experience and perceive the mentioned phenomenon (Rose, Beeby and Parker, 1995, p. 1124). Yildirim and Simsek (2016, p. 69) state that phenomenology is used in research to investigate phenomena that are commonly experienced in daily life but are not fully understood.

Metaphors are recognized as a significant technique in qualitative research for conducting thorough investigations in situations when conventional face-to-face research methods, including observation and interviews, are impractical. Metaphor analysis has been considered suitable for study in the field of open and distance learning because of the distinctive features of this educational context. The characteristics include the extensive arrangement of open and distance learning, the physical segregation between learners and instructors, and the imperative to proficiently express and comprehend intricate notions associated with open and distance learning (Gunes and Firat, 2016, p.124).

Participants

The participants consisted of persons who were registered in the online student communities of Anadolu University Open Education System, specifically the History, Cinema, Photography, Book, Music, and Informatics Communities, throughout the academic years of 2020-2021. The individuals encompassed both present students and graduates.

The study utilized criteria sampling; a planned sampling approach often employed in qualitative research. Criterion sampling entails the thorough assessment of all situations that meet a predetermined set of criteria. The researcher has the option to employ either a pre-existing set of criteria or develop their own criteria for the study (Yildirim and Simsek, 2016). The study included 627 students/graduates who actively participated in the book, photography, cinema, music, history, and informatics clubs of Anadolu University Open Education System during the autumn semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. These persons voluntarily participated in the survey. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants, encompassing gender, age, and educational status. The table presents information regarding the frequency and percentages of participants' graduation programme, as well as their affiliations with other societies.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

		f	%
Gender	Female	315	50.2
	Male	312	49.8
Age	18-30	359	57.2
	31 and over	268	42.8
Education Statues	Students	484	77.2
	Graduate	143	22.8
Community Membership*	Book	366	58.4
	Photograph	338	53.9
	Cinema	285	45.5
	Music	272	42.5
	History	244	38.6
	Informatics	57	9.1
Total		**627**	**100.0**

* *The cumulative number surpasses 100 percent as a result of individuals who are members of numerous groups.*

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were collected through a questionnaire form that was generated on the Google Forms platform. The questionnaire comprised two separate components. The first part of the form included questions about the demographic characteristics of the participants. The second phase of the study involved administering a questionnaire specifically tailored to evaluate the viewpoints of students and alumni who engage in online student communities, commonly known as student clubs, inside the open and distance education system. The aim was to collect their perspectives on these communities and acquire their viewpoints on the importance of online student communities, which have a significant number of users inside the Open Education System. The participants were instructed to fill in the blank in the statement *"Student communities are similar to .....; because....."* with metaphors. These metaphors were then used as the primary data for the research.

The inquiry data underwent analysis utilizing the content analysis methodology. The primary methodology utilized in content analysis involves collecting data that is comparable in relation to a particular concept and subject matter, and subsequently developing a method to efficiently convey this information to the reader. The main goal of content analysis is to discover and clarify the concepts and relationships that might serve as an explanatory framework for the data obtained from participants' perspectives, as well as file and document analysis (Yildirim and Simsek, 2016).

The researchers employ a sequence of procedures to study and understand metaphors. The analogies were gathered from the data acquired through written contributions from students and graduates and were organized into a thorough list. Concise statements that lack metaphors, explanations, or elaborations are purposely excluded, and any comments made are not within the scope of the research. For example, basic assertions such as "communities bring me joy" are not encompassed in the context. Out of the 627 responses received, 327 were considered suitable for inclusion in the review.

In the second phase, the metaphorical expressions created by students and graduates were thoroughly evaluated, and only the ones considered valid were selected. The aim of this study is to classify the valid metaphors (the metaphor and its justification) according to their similarities after identifying the sample metaphors. There were a total of 327 metaphors, which were classified into eight separate categories.

Validity and Reliability

In order to validate the reliability of the results, the obtained data underwent independent analysis by the two researchers participating in the study. Afterwards, the researchers gathered and began to compare

their own analyses side by side. An additional expert opinion was sought to determine the accuracy of the categories defined in the study in reflecting the underlying metaphors. The expert in the relevant field was asked to create metaphors that fit into the right category. Later, a comparison was conducted between the categories of the domain specialist and the researchers. In order to ensure the reliability of the study, the researchers utilized the framework established by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Reliability can be quantified by computing the ratio of consistent decisions to the total number of decisions, both consistent and inconsistent. The research's reliability was assessed to be 94% based on the result of this calculation.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

This section offers the findings about the online community's perceptions of students and alumni associated with Anadolu University's online student communities. A total of 327 metaphors were discovered in the data obtained from the participants, as shown in table 2. The metaphors were subsequently classified into seven unique conceptual categories, taking into account their shared qualities (table 3).

Metaphors used for Online Community

Table 2. Participants' metaphors about online communities

Metaphor series	Metaphor name	f	Metaphor series	Metaphor name	f
1	To each other*	27	98	Beautiful	1
2	Family	25	99	Ring	1
3	Tree	10	100	Imagination	1
4	Sun	7	101	School open to all	1
5	Life	7	102	Excitement	1
6	Social network	5	103	Hogwarts	1
7	Class	5	104	Organization	1
8	World	5	105	Serenity	1
9	Light	4	106	Ideal groups	1
10	Education	4	107	Ideology	1
11	Book	4	108	Communication	1
12	School	4	109	Science	1
13	Entertainment	4	110	Pearl	1
14	Forest	3	111	Human body	1
15	Rainbow	3	112	Building	1
16	Ocean	3	113	Internet	1
17	Virtual environment	3	114	Job search site	1
18	Conversation	3	115	Cafe	1
19	Moon	3	116	Coffee	1
20	Star	3	117	Crowded dinner table	1
21	Hobby	2	118	Heart rhythm	1
22	Party	2	119	Canteen	1
23	Social media	2	120	Snow drift	1
24	Social platform	2	121	Complex structure	1
25	Friends group	2	122	Complex puzzle	1
26	Friend environment	2	123	Categorised group	1

27	Ant	2	124	Spoiled soup	1
28	Pomegranate	2	125	Exploration	1
29	Virtual world	2	126	Personal developments centres	1
30	Useful	2	127	Mass	1
31	Culture	2	128	Classical music concert	1
32	Library	2	129	Keyboard	1
33	Game	2	130	Conference	1
34	Meeting at a common point	2	131	Copy	1
35	Leaf	2	132	Sheep	1
36	Beehive	2	133	Bridge	1
37	Sea	2	134	Village	1
38	Computer	2	135	Club	1
39	Improvement	2	136	Institution	1
40	Sky	2	137	Undergraduate course	1
41	Friendship, School friendship	2	138	Funfair	1
42	Happiness	2	139	Seasons	1
43	Activity	1	140	Magnet	1
44	Flame	1	141	Candle	1
45	Kindergarten	1	142	Pain relief	1
46	Encyclopaedia	1	143	Discussion	1
47	Apartment meeting	1	144	Music box	1
48	Car spare shop	1	145	Nouron	1
49	Bee	1	146	Dive in	1
50	Friendship website	1	147	School canteen	1
51	Soldier	1	148	indispensable	1
52	Socialization	1	149	Common area	1
53	Love	1	150	Environment	1
54	People on the same boat	1	151	Homework	1
55	Honey	1	152	Afternoon tea on the lake shore	1
56	Sports lesson	1	153	Student	1
57	Composition	1	154	Learning	1
58	Information tool	1	155	Instructor	1
59	Having knowledge	1	156	Formal student club	1
60	Community knowledge	1	157	Story book	1
61	The cosmos of knowledge and culture	1	158	Special classroom	1
62	Knowledge	1	159	Free fun	1
63	Bouquet of flowers	1	160	Self confidence	1
64	Ball	1	161	Warm cotton pyjamas	1
65	Working together	1	162	Panel	1
66	Leisure time	1	163	Comfortability	1
67	Spend leisure time	1	164	Power	1
68	Part of whole	1	165	Colour	1
69	Geography	1	166	Wind	1
70	Roof	1	167	Intimate friendly atmosphere	1
71	Tea	1	168	Responsibility	1
72	Flower	1	169	A social tool	1
73	Flower garden	1	170	Social group	1

74	Chocolate	1	171	Social life	1
75	Looking for your sock's mate	1	172	Social environment	1
76	Soup	1	173	Intangible communication	1
77	Dart board	1	174	Internship	1
78	Test board	1	175	Non-governmental organization	1
79	Break	1	176	Water	1
80	Nature	1	177	Bra	1
81	Friend Assembly	1	178	Flack	1
82	Education course	1	179	Team	1
83	Red blood cells of education	1	180	Chicken farms	1
84	Elkin	1	181	Facility	1
85	Crew	1	183	Seed	1
86	Electron	1	184	Society	1
87	Adolescence	1	185	Passion	1
88	Equal part	1	186	Horizon	1
89	Interaction	1	187	University club	1
90	Faculty	1	188	University	1
91	Philosophical approach	1	189	Vision	1
92	Exchange of ideas	1	190	Don't fantasise about what you can't do	1
93	Idea workshop	1	191	Artificial communication	1
94	Football	1	192	Youtube	1
95	Immigrants' birds	1	193	Time line	1
96	Shapes in the sky	1	194	Observation	1
97	Day	1			
Total	**231**		**Total**		**96**

**The aforementioned phenomenon demonstrates commonalities by providing both motivation and perspective in a comprehensive manner. The members apply the metaphor "to each other" to develop real links with other online groups.*

Categories and Subcategories Related to Online Community Metaphors

The research participants' accounts of online communities comprise a range of metaphors, which can be classified into categories such as information dissemination and generation, social connections, personal interests, communication and engagement, advantages and personal fulfillment, technology, and tedium. The following tables display the metaphors linked to the aforementioned categories and subcategories.

Table 3. Distribution of participants' categories related to online communities

Category	Metaphor number	%
Knowledge sharing	114	34,8
Social relationship	106	32,4
Hobby	33	10,3
Benefit/Life	26	7,95
Interaction/Communication	29	8,86
Technology	12	3,66
Monotony	7	2,14

Table 4. Examples of Participants' Metaphors about Sharing and Creating Knowledge Learning and Acquiring Knowledge

Category	Subcategory	f	%	Metaphor
Knowledge sharing	Education / Informatization	94	28,7	To each other (12), sun (5), school(4), light (4), moon(3), tree, (2) life (2), ocean (2), education (2), development (2), culture (2), behive, bee, love, learning, observation, discovery, information tool knowledge society, friend environment, knowledge, geography, world, team, undergraduate course, working together, diving sea, nature, friend assembly, education course, red blood cells of education, philosophical approach, idea workshop, exchange of ideas, horizon, immigrants birds, day, imaginations, science, activity, buildings, Internet, personal development centres, non-governmental organization, candle, discussion, pomegranate, indispensible, environment, life, student, university, class, a social tool, social environment, internship, chicken farms, colour, vision, music box leaf, you tube and time line
	Instructional media and material	10	3,05	Book (3), library (2), panel, conference, homework, encyclopaedia, instructor
	Educational institution	10	3,05	Faculty, test board, essay, school open to all, Hogwarts, organization, school canteen, formal student club, special classroom, facility, university executive board
Total		**114**	**34,8**	

Table 4 presents the metaphors employed by the research participants in the information sharing category. After examining the table, it is clear that the participants primarily used metaphors related to information exchange when describing their perceptions of online community. These metaphors accounted for 34.8% of all the metaphors expressed. After examining the subcategories within the field of information exchange, it is clear that the most frequently used metaphors relate to education/information (28.7%), instructional media and material, and educational institution (3.05%). Below are the subcategories and metaphors that have been offered.

In the context of acquiring education and knowledge, a total of 94 metaphors were used to describe the duties and responsibilities of student communities in connection to education, sharing information, and personal development. The participants offered diverse metaphors related to the process of gaining education and information, accompanied by their own justifications.

"It is similar to training courses; you learn information you do not know and you ask questions and get answers"

"It's like construction, it creates the opportunity to build new things"

"It's like a pomegranate because outwardly it's one knowledge and inwardly it's many knowledge"

"It is similar to each other because it is educational"

"It is like light because they will illuminate the future."

"It's like a stream because something new can be learnt every day."

"It's like diving; because under the sea is a whole new world and very different"

"It is like a world because it consists of curious, knowledge-hungry people who do not know each other".

"It is like the red blood cells of education, because it gives colour and life to education"

"It's like an undergraduate course because I can get very different and detailed information in these communities"

The dominant metaphor utilized by the participants in this context is the metaphor of mutual similarity, emphasizing similarities with other online groups. Stock (2021) states that the metaphorical connection between darkness, symbolizing ignorance, and light, symbolizing education, is frequently employed in the field of education. This metaphor is based on deep and extensive worldly experiences and may be used universally to various situations, languages, and cultures. This study utilized metaphors linked to warmth and lighting, such as the sun, light, moon, and candle, and provided a rationale for their application in the context of education. The sun metaphor was frequently used in different conceptual realms as a crucial and dynamic source. The usage of ocean and sea metaphors in the context of education and knowledge relates to subjects that should be actively explored in daily life. In contrast, metaphors such as life and blood cells are used to emphasize the essential role of these communities in the core nature of existence.

The educational institution subcategory comprises 10 metaphors, including faculty, test board, public school, Hogwarts, organization, school canteen, formal student club, private classroom, facility, and university executive board. The participants offered the following terminology to clarify certain metaphors and their underlying justifications. The metaphors used in this category related to school, education, knowledge, learning, and development are tangible metaphors that directly represent the acts and institutions connected to learning.

> *"It is the support of school-like education"*
>
> *"It is similar to school canteens because the most important thing they have in common is being a student"*
>
> *"It turns into a special classroom because we take lessons from experts in their fields and we gain practice along with theory thanks to the meetings"*
>
> *"Student communities are like Hogwarts because they give people what they want to receive, not moulds"*

The subcategory of instructional media and material includes diverse metaphors that enhance the accessibility of information for community members. The metaphors used include book (3), library (2), panel, conference, assignment, encyclopedia, and instructor. The participants expressed the selected metaphors and their corresponding arguments in the following way.

> *"Student communities are like a 1000-page encyclopaedia because they teach people something all the time."*
>
> *"It is like a library, as in every book, you can learn from every person"*
>
> *"It is similar to a conference because it provides a chance to learn from everyone".*
>
> *"Student Communities are similar to panels because, just like panels, the aim is to reach a conclusion".*
>
> *It is not, it is to analyse the subject and the listener can also participate in the same way."*
>
> *"Student communities are similar to instructor because they are informative"*

Table 5. Participants' metaphors related to the category of social relationship

Category	Subcategory	f	%	Metaphors
Social relations	Friendship, family, team	56	17,1	Family (25), ant (2), tree (3), cafe, friendship site, friendly friendly environment, university clubs, group of friends, bridge, friendly environment, friend, leaf, flame, happiness, star, soldier, game, ball, football, institution, snow mass, forest, pomegranate, ring, power, honeycomb, world, equal part, team
	Common interest, purpose	27	8,25	To each other (5), class (4), meeting at a common point (2), common space, coming out of asociality, people in the same boat, honey, cosmos of knowledge and culture, part of the whole, crowded dinner table, categorised group, searching for the match of the sock, excitement, human body, school friendship, social group, roof, soup and passion
	Inclusiveness, openness, diversity	23	7,03	Earth (3), rainbow (3), star (2), tree, kindergarten, composition, bunch of flowers, flower garden, electron, sky, complex structure, complex puzzle, cut soup, classical music concert, magnet, ocean, forest and storybook
Total		**106**	**32,4**	

Table 5 displays the subcategories and metaphors linked to the social relationship category that were discovered in the participants' evaluation of online communities. The notion of social interaction incorporates diverse metaphors, including friendship, family, team (17.1%), common interest, purpose (8.25%), and inclusivity, openness, diversity (7.03%). These analogies are frequently encountered in online communities, where members get together and form relationships or bonds with administrators, teachers, and other participants. The overall occurrence rate of the social relationship category in all responses was determined to be 32.4%. The subsequent metaphors are relevant to the classification and subclassification of social interactions, along with corresponding exemplifications linked to these metaphors.

Friendship, in the context of interpersonal connections, includes a range of entities such as family, teams, and social groupings. The notion of family is depicted 25 times, but the ant and tree analogies are each noticed 2 and 3 times respectively. Additional depictions encompass the coffee shop, social networking platform, and welcoming atmosphere, all of which suggest environments that promote the development of connections. Furthermore, this category encompasses university clubs, friend groups, and bridges, which serve as symbols of the establishment and upkeep of friendships. Additional metaphors, such as leaf, flame, happiness, star, soldier, game, marble, football, institution, snow mass, forest, pomegranate, ring, power, honeycomb, world, equal part, and team, expand the range of representations in the friendship category. The prevalence of positive metaphors in this study can be viewed as a dependable indicator of factors such as satisfaction and motivation among open and distant learners. Within the domain of distance education, difficulties such as feelings of isolation, reduced sense of belonging, and disengagement from the learning environment are considered problems that can be overcome by strengthening the sense of community. According to Holmberg (1989), in his theory on interaction and communication in distant education, a strong and effective conversation between learners and teachers promotes emotional connection to the educational institution. He underscores the crucial significance of human relationships, work fulfillment, and empathy between learners and institutional staff in distant education. Therefore, empathy and a feeling of belonging act as powerful motivators to encourage the learner. Out of all the remarks, the metaphor that is most prominent is that of family. The family metaphor is frequently used to depict the development of feelings like steadfast support, acceptance, and communal sharing in social relationships. The participants presented metaphors related to this domain and explained the reasoning behind their selections as follows:

"Like family, it's unity."

"Like a family, you share everything".

"It is like a family because everyone helps each other"

"It is like a family; because you feel comfortable, happy and learning when you are with them."

"What is shared in the family is gratuitous."

"Everyone is together in the family."

"There is sincerity in the family."

"In the family, you organise and achieve things together."

"Since it is a place where friendships are made, reinforced and socialisation increases, it is similar to cafes."

"Student communities are similar to a sincere, friendly environment because it is a platform where pros and cons are shared".

"It is similar to a bridge because it brings distances and intimacy closer".

Within the specific subcategory characterized by common interests and goals, the participants together produced a grand total of 27 metaphors related to the experience of uniting for a shared purpose, motivated by their engagement in online student communities. The text utilizes various metaphors, such as mutual interaction, educational setting, convergence, shared environment, overcoming isolation, shared journey, sweetness, expansive realm of knowledge and culture, interconnectedness, gathering of individuals, organized grouping, pursuit of compatibility, enthusiasm, human anatomy, companionship within an educational institution, collective association, shelter, nourishing mixture, and intense emotion. The participants presented metaphors related to this particular subcategory and explained the reasoning behind their selections in the following manner:

"Student communities are like a crowded dinner table, because the members enjoy the subjects in the same field together, as if they were enjoying the same meal together at the same table"

"It is similar to passion and excitement. Because it brings together people who are passionate and excited about what they do, what they are interested in"

"It is similar to a roof because they are communities that want to increase our awareness with our common interests"

"Student communities are like a cosmos of knowledge and culture because people with similar interests come together"

"People who get on the same ship have a common time to spend until they reach a similar harbour, that is, until graduation"

Within the context of inclusivity, openness, and diversity, the participants utilized several metaphors to depict online communities as a cohesive entity that brings together individuals with a wide range of characteristics, such as age, gender, geographical location, profession, and educational history. The metaphors included several themes, such as the global rainbow (3), star (2), tree, kindergarten, composition, bouquet of flowers, flower garden, electron, sky, intricate structure, intricate puzzle, fragmented soup, classical music concert, magnet, ocean, forest, and storybook. The participants justified their usage of metaphors, such as rainbow, planet, ocean, forest, and flower garden, by emphasizing the diverse nature of individuals within communities. The participants' statements explaining the reasons for using metaphors such as tale, rainbow, world, and magnet are as follows:

"It is similar to storybooks; everyone has a story"

"Like a song composition, there are people from every note

"It is a rainbow because everyone is different"

"A rainbow because they are platforms where different colours (thoughts) come together"

"Cut soup is not homogeneous"

"Student communities are like the world. Because it brings together many people with different departments at school, different aims and goals in life, different ages, maybe different races and colours, on a common issue.

"Student Communities are like 'magnets' because they are 'communities where students from all walks of life come together under different organisations"

Table 6. Participants' metaphors related to the hobby category

Category	f	%	Metaphors
Hobby	33	10,09	Entertainment (4) hobby (2), party (2) groups of friends, physical education class, to each other, leisure time, leisure time utilisation, knowledge, Friday night, tea, chocolate, dart board, break in the lesson, sky, peace, ideal groups, heart rhythm, book, village, club, amusement park, game, afternoon tea by the lake, free entertainment, warm cotton pyjamas, comfort and happiness, relaxation and happiness, imagining things, you can't
Total	**33**	**10.09**	

Table 6 presents a newly emerged category in the metaphorical interpretations of online communities. According to the data in the table, it is evident that 10.09% of the participants classified online communities using metaphors related to hobbies. The metaphors used to describe student communities as enjoyable and relaxing include terms like entertainment, hobby, party, tea, groups of friends, physical education class, leisure time, leisure time evaluation, Friday night, chocolate, dart board, break in the lesson, sky, peace, ideal groups, heart rhythm, book, village, club, amusement park, game, free entertainment, cotton hot pyjamas, comfort, happiness, and engaging in extraordinary activities. The participants presented metaphors related to this domain and explained their reasoning for choosing them as follows:

"It's like a village because people relax there"

"It is like Friday night, because you feel relieved and happy knowing that the next day is Saturday."

"It's like chocolate, it gives you happiness."

"It's like an amusement park because you don't get bored there, you have fun, you can do all kinds of activities"

"It helps to distract us from entertainment"

"Student communities are like cotton, warm pyjamas; because you are in what you want to be and you are happy."

"A break in the lecture relaxes you."

"It is similar to physical education lessons, even if the weather is bad (problems) there is fun".

"It is like drinking tea by the lake in the afternoon because that is the only way to empty your head."

"Student communities are like a party; because they are fun."

Table 7. Participants' metaphors related to the category of utility and life

Category	f	%	Metaphors
Benefit and life	29	8,86	Tree (4), life (3) to each other (3), useful (2), sun (2), car spare parts store, coffee, painkiller, beehive, crop, society, seed, puberty, season, forest, bra, wind, responsibility, flower and water.
Total	29	8,86	

Table 7 displays the metaphors offered by the participants that are linked to the benefit/life category. According to the results, a large portion of the participants, precisely 8.86%, considered online student communities to be an important part of their life and a valuable means of establishing interpersonal connections. The discourse utilizes a range of metaphors, such as tree (4), life (3), each other (3), useful (2), sun (2), auto spare parts store, coffee, painkiller, beehive, crop, society, seed, adolescence, season, forest, bra, wind, responsibility, flower, and water. The participants offered insights on specific metaphors related to the domain of benefit/life, along with their relevant rationales.

"It is like water because it gives life"

"It's like life because it's like breathing."

"A car is like a spare parts store; because it supplies whoever needs the most."

"It's like a tree because you follow it and eat its fruit when the day comes."

"It's like a painkiller, it relieves some of my pains."

"It's like a beehive because it aims to do useful work"

"Like crops, if you look after them, they ripen and bear fruit"

"It is like a forest because as it breathes, it benefits those around it"

Table 8. Participants' metaphors related to communication/interaction category

Category	Subcategory	f	%	Metaphors
Communication/ interaction	Communication	21	6,42	To each other (3), chat (3), interaction, pearl, confident, keyboard, shapes in the sky, life, job finding site, social life, ideology, beautiful, canteen, apartment meeting, communicating, neuron and social platform
	Virtual Communication	5	1,52	Virtual world (2), abstract communication, virtual environment and artificial communication
Total		**26**	**7,95**	

Table 8 provides a thorough summary of the several subcategories and metaphors in the field of communication/ interaction. The occurrence rate of metaphors depicting the ability of online communities to enable the sharing of ideas, promote connections among members, and encourage efficient communication is 7.95%. The section consists of two separate subcategories, specifically communication and virtual communication.

The participants articulated a range of metaphors to describe communication and interaction, such as mutual engagement (3), online conversation (3), interpersonal exchange, precious gem, assertiveness, input device, celestial formations, existence, employment search platform, societal connections, belief system, aesthetically pleasing, communal dining area, residential gathering, interpersonal connection, neural network, and digital social network. The participants elucidated the rationales underlying these metaphors.

"It is like chatting with someone at the next table while sitting in a cafe because you have a common interest and maybe there are few people to talk to..."

"It is similar to a job site because one of the biggest benefits of student communities is that it increases communication between students, provides networking, and increases personal competences."

"It is similar to a canteen; the interaction is high."

"It is similar to an apartment meeting; we don't know what is going on in the apartment."

"It is similar to a chat because there is interaction."

"Similar to neurons, requires interaction network"

"It's like a social platform because everyone expresses their own opinion while respecting the opinion of others."

The participants articulated many metaphors to convey their objections of virtual communication and the underlying reasons.

"It is similar to abstract communication because it has a dimension that isolates the person or individual and reduces human relations.

Since the communities here are in the virtual world, they are very different from communication with real people and do not contain the same emotions."

"It is similar to cyberspace because communication is not face-to-face"

"It is similar to the virtual environment; because there is no face-to-face communication"

"It is similar to artificial communication, because there is no face-to-face communication."

Table 9. Participants' metaphors related to technology category

Category	f	%	Metaphors
Teknology	12	3,66	Sun (5), computer (2) virtual environment (2) social media (2) and social platform
Total	**12**	**3,66**	

The technology category, which represents 3.66% of the total content, contains numerous statements regarding the operating structure of the community within an online program. These sentences include metaphors such as social network (5), computer (2), virtual environment (2), social media (2), and social platform. The participants expressed specific analogies and offered justifications for their selections.

"It is similar to a computer because it works systematically."

"It is similar to social media because it builds an information network"

Table 10. Participants' metaphors related to the category of monotony / boredom

Category	Sayi	%	Metaphors
Monotony/boredom	7	2,14	To each other (3), copy, mass, sheep, flock
Total	**7**	**2,14**	

Table 10 displays the metaphors employed by the participants in the monotony/boredom category. The expressions with a rate of 2.14% correspond to unfavorable portrayals of online student collectives. These expressions consist of three metaphors: inclusion, duplication, and collective behavior, specifically falling under this particular category. An examination was conducted on the sheep metaphor in relation to the concepts of docility, subordination, and submission. The participants expressed specific metaphors and offered explanations to support them.

"It's like a copy, because each student is unique"

"They are similar to each other because they are almost the same people"

"To the masses, they all have the same mindset and that's a bad thing"

"It's similar because it's monotonous. It doesn't appeal to young people"

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to determine participants' perceptions of the Anadolu University Open and Distance Education System Online Student Communities through the use of metaphors as a research instrument. The study revealed that the participants evaluated online communities by taking into account multiple features instead of depending on a single concept. Hence, the metaphors used by participants in online student communities were categorized into seven main kinds. After examining the proportional distribution of metaphors, it was noted that the category with the greatest number of metaphors was information sharing and information creation, making up 34.8% of the overall total. Following that, the previously specified categories were noted.

After examining the participants' statements about metaphors linked to online student communities and their motivations, it became clear that the participants had positive attitudes towards gaining information, building social connections, communicating and interacting with other students and alumni, and deriving personal enjoyment and benefits from these communities.

The researchers discovered that the participants evaluated student communities as an environment that promotes both the interchange and creation of knowledge. The use of metaphoric expressions such as learning, observation, discovery, information acquisition, lesson assimilation, cultural immersion, educational pursuit, conceptual exploration, intellectual expansion, personal growth, student engagement, university involvement, and class participation collectively suggest that the individuals involved view these communities as opportunities for informal educational experiences. The subcategory related to the acquisition of knowledge and information displayed the highest occurrence of metaphors, representing 28.74% of the overall total. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that virtual communities can enable a range of activities, including information seeking, sharing, and provision, as well as socializing and engaging in other forms of contact (Burnett, 2000). Research has confirmed that the main reason why people engage in online communities is to exchange information (Wasko and Faraj, 2000). These communities provide individuals with the chance to casually generate and distribute information, as well as connect with like-minded individuals (Chen and Hung, 2010; Chunngam, Sumalee and Murphy, 2014). Participants greatly appreciate these groups and consider them to be a significant reservoir of knowledge. Communities offer opportunities to interact with experts, utilize the knowledge and experiences of others, gain new ideas, methods, and technology, and receive support (Tausczik and Huang, 2020).

Within the scope of social interactions, this study found that metaphors emphasizing unity and coherence, such as friendship, familial bonds, and collaboration, ranked second in terms of importance. SosyalleiThe issue of socialization in distance education settings is often seen as a disadvantage compared to traditional in-person education. However, it can be argued that online communities play a vital role in meeting the need for a supportive social environment among open and distance learners. Online communities are digital environments enabled by information technology. These virtual places function as platforms where individuals seek emotional support, a feeling of belonging, and motivational encouragement (Furlong, 1989; Hiltz and Wellman, 1997; Korenman and Wyatt, 1996; Smith, 1999; Sproull and Faraj, 1997).

Social presence is a concept employed to enhance communication in online groups and mitigate feelings of loneliness among individuals. Social presence, as now defined, pertains to an individual's ability to interact with a community, engage in meaningful communication within a reliable setting, and form interpersonal connections by expressing their distinct personalities (Garrison, 2009, p. 352). The use of the family metaphor might be seen as a sign of the trust placed in these groups.

Inclusion, as a subtype of social interactions, refers to the ability to include and incorporate all persons in a community, hence reducing exclusionary practices. Hence, it signifies the integration of all individuals into diverse systems, decision-making processes, and activities (Talmage and Knopf 2017). Inclusiveness is commonly recognized as a quantifiable characteristic of participation. Inclusive participation is the intentional endeavor to involve pertinent groups or interests, while considering individual characteristics such as gender, age, color, and sexuality (Barnes, Newman, Knops, & Sullivan, 2003; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). This categorization includes metaphors that share resemblances with the structural attributes of open and distance learning. Open and distance learning has been shown to greatly benefit inclusion, especially in poor countries, by reducing several barriers to higher education such as gender, age, socio-economic status, and geographical distance (Yasmin, 2013).

The notion of openness is intricately linked to the pedagogical framework. Encompassing the reduction of constraints in the learning process, enabling learners to exercise autonomy in making choices about their own learning (Rumble, 1997). Openness promotes increased availability, fairness, and cooperation in the field of education. Furthermore, it promotes socioeconomic fairness and removes barriers to education (Bozkurt et al., 2023). Online communities enable the convergence of persons with varied backgrounds, encompassing differences in religion, ethnicity, experience, perspectives, identities, color, class, and gender, who come together to discuss and exchange ideas on a common topic. Facilitating the integration of community members into online groups is of utmost importance, necessitating the active promotion of inclusion and diversity. The Anadolu University Online Student Communities prioritized diversity, as demonstrated through the utilization of diverse metaphors to illustrate this theme. The metaphors encompassed allusions to various elements such as the world, rainbow, star, tree, kindergarten, composition, bouquet of flowers, flower garden, electron, sky, complex structure, complex puzzle, cut soup, classical music concert, magnet, ocean, forest, and storybook. The analysis of metaphors and phrases in terms of their underlying justifications emphasized the importance of embracing diverse perspectives, encouraging inclusiveness, and cultivating a sense of unity throughout communities.

The survey participants utilized metaphors such as leisure time, chocolate, hamlet, and quiet to depict student communities within the realm of entertainment and hobbies. The metaphors presented here are consistent with prior studies conducted by Wasko and Faraj (2000) and Ishii (2008), which discovered that individuals view online communities as providers of entertainment and enjoyment.

The Uses and Gratifications Approach aims to comprehend the underlying reasons that drive individuals' use of media. According to the hypothesis put out by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), people intentionally and deliberately use the media to meet specific desires and achieve specified goals. As per Giddens (cited in Cizmeci, 2015), people use mass media for various reasons such as acquiring information and knowledge, forming a connection with media personalities, participating in social interactions, developing a sense of community, finding relief from daily pressures, and seeking amusement. Bruckman and Jensen (2002) state that people participate in communities, both online and offline, because they believe they will gain personal advantages from the experience. Studies on new media have revealed that individuals utilize these tools for various purposes, such as establishing social connections, enhancing personal status, engaging in online commerce, benefiting from the convenience of communication technologies, and gaining economic advantages (Kaye, 1998; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000; Song, LaRose, Eastin, and Lin, 2004). In Sungwook Do-Hyung and Han's (2014) study, it was shown that individuals who join a virtual community carefully assess the advantages and disadvantages at every step of the decision-making process inside the community. Moreover, the research suggests that if these individuals do not perceive any benefits from their involvement in a specific community, they are inclined to hunt for alternative virtual communities. The study explored metaphors related to the notions of life and benefit, including prominent metaphors such as life, tree, seed, sun, and beehive. The focus was centered on the advantages obtained via communal interactions.

Online communities are communities that are aided by technology, where electronic communication is the main way people interact (Dennis, Pootheri and Natarajan, 1998; Hiltz and Wellman, 1997). The Internet, together with its related technologies, enables the smooth incorporation of individuals into diverse societies. Online communities utilize many technological improvements, such as communication systems, video capabilities, photographic tools, audio functionality, webcams, and other related features. Preece, Krichmar, and Abras (2003) state that the development of standardized frameworks for these technologies has enabled the growth and progress of the associated protocols (Plant, 2004). Among the different metaphors used to understand the concept of community, only 3.66% of these metaphors were identified to specifically explain the operational dynamics of online communities, especially those supported through electronic communication platforms.

The investigation unveiled numerous metaphors that are linked to adverse perceptions. These metaphors relate to the comparison between in-person interaction and online communication, the disruptions in community operation, and the view of the program as unengaging. The participants emphasized that the communities fail to achieve their expected goals, using metaphors such as each other, copy, mass, sheep, flock, cyberspace, abstract communication, virtual environment, artificial communication, looking for the match of your sock, and test board. Building upon the findings of Garton and Wellman (1995), who argue

that communication in virtual environments is impersonal, lacks social subtleties, and is primarily focused on completing tasks rather than face-to-face interactions, metaphors that highlight the importance of in-person communication in interpersonal relationships are viewed negatively.

The following suggestions are recommended:

This study investigates the users' impression of the Online Student Communities that were introduced in the Anadolu University Open Education System during the 2016-2017 academic year. The purpose of establishing these communities is to facilitate social engagement and encourage a wide range of interests among students, similar to the student clubs offered to students in traditional departments. Evaluating the viewpoints and opinions of participants is important when it comes to building and reorganizing community-related spaces, as well as dealing with and solving connected problems. System administrators should carefully examine the elements associated with negative metaphors and explore different approaches and topics, such as conducting interviews, to comprehensively evaluate metaphors and their underlying causes.

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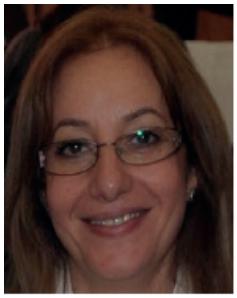

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