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Metaphors Reflecting Veterinary Students' Distance Education Experiences[1]

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Abstract

The study examined veterinary students' metaphorical perceptions of the distance education process they experienced during the pandemic. In this context, students' cognitive, affective, and practice-based perspectives on the process were revealed. The research was grounded in a phenomenological design. The research participants were a total of 254 veterinary students from 17 different universities. Data collected via an online open-ended form were analyzed using content analysis. The study identified 188 metaphors, which were grouped into three main categories: ‘educational process’, ‘educational gains’, and ‘student status’. Some students described the process as supportive, comforting, or inclusive. However, the majority of students mentioned a lack of practice, inefficiency, and wasted effort, and stated that they felt helpless, trapped, anxious, and alone. All these results highlight the need to strengthen the pedagogical context in online education planning, especially for applied disciplines, to increase virtual clinical simulations, and to develop psycho-social support processes for students.

Keywords: Metaphor, distance education, veterinary students, applied science

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Introduction

The conditions necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated significant innovation processes in many areas, including education. As a natural consequence, it has taken its place as a component of the Education 4.0 transformation (Marini & Milawati, 2020). Indeed, the effects of this period have led to the proliferation of distance and hybrid learning models and the conclusion that it is essential to develop the technological competence of educators who teach (Hao et al., 2021).

During the pandemic, mandatory distance learning processes were conducted through both synchronous and asynchronous methods. However, this approach was more about transferring relevant methods to a digital environment rather than being grounded in pedagogical principles (Stojan et al., 2021). Students have stated that while they appreciate the flexibility of online learning in these processes, they significantly miss face-to-face interaction; this situation has led to a decline in their academic performance, social connectedness, and motivation, and they have had to cope with loneliness, stress, and burnout (Shahrvini et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2020).

Students without access to the internet or devices, or with insufficient access, have been disadvantaged; in addition, it has been noted that institutions in low-income areas have experienced difficulties in transitioning to distance education (Southworth & Gleason, 2021). Accordingly, various policies have been adopted and revised to reduce the digital divide and ensure equal opportunities in education (Liu, 2021).

Reflections of Distance Education in Applied Fields

Within the scope of the research, a literature review was conducted on health fields in the context of applied areas. During the pandemic, it was determined that students in the pre-clerkship period in the health field adapted more easily than students who had moved on to the clinical training period. However, it was observed that students in the clinical period reported the impact of the lack of practice as negative (Dhillon et al., 2020). Indeed, a review of the literature revealed that students' success rates in online practical courses were low (Mahdy, 2020), that the lack of clinical practice was the biggest problem (Hadian & Dalir-Naghadeh, 2025), and that they reported being inadequate in skills such as diagnosis, diagnosis, and decision-making Students have stated that online veterinary education does not adequately reflect real life and is insufficient in providing professional competence (Mahdy, 2020). It has been observed that a significant portion of veterinary and medical school students, for whom practical training plays an important role in the field of health, have expressed that it is quite difficult to measure their practical skills during online education and that they are concerned about being inadequate in terms of professional clinical skills upon graduation (Islam & Alam, 2021; Ryan et al., 2021). Reviews of the distance education process after the pandemic indicate that students' losses in practical education may have lasting effects on their professional competency levels after graduation (Nejadghaderi et al., 2024).

The Importance of Metaphors in Revealing Perceptions of Distance Education

Metaphors are important elements that enable individuals to express various events, phenomena, and concepts by making them concrete. Metaphors are not only considered as a text-based analysis tool, but also as a qualitative research method that interprets individuals' emotional and cognitive responses to their emotional resilience, motivation, and learning situations (Vahdani-Sanavi & Demirkol, 2024). When examining metaphor studies conducted in the context of distance education, it was determined that participants described their distance education experiences using concepts such as ‘cold’, ‘disconnected’ and ‘virtual’. This reflects the participants' perception that their experience was limited by a context that restricted social interaction (Alan, 2021). In another research, it was observed that participants addressed their positive and negative views from a broader perspective. Examining these metaphors, it was noted that expressions were used in two main

categories (positive and negative), such as ‘medicine’, ‘hero’, ‘vitamin’, ‘poison’, ‘wall’, ‘alienation’ etc. It was determined that these approaches of the participants not only facilitated access to information regarding the distance education process but also contained feelings of alienation and fatigue (Özmen, 2021). Some studies in the literature have revealed metaphors related to various negative contexts of distance education. For example, they have been described as an approach that cannot fully meet socio-emotional needs, such as ‘dark tunnel’, ‘glass wall’, ‘loneliness room’, ‘longing for friends’, ‘empty classroom’, ‘school prison’, ‘isolation area’, ‘digital stress’ etc. emotional needs and negatively affecting their emotional ties to school (Hassan et al., 2022; Kaleli Yılmaz & Sönmez, 2022; Vural et al., 2022; Yıldız et al., 2021). In light of all this data, it has been observed that learners find distance education limited, particularly in social-emotional contexts; as well as in terms of the opportunities offered for accessing knowledge.

The Gap in Veterinary Students' Distance Education Experience

A review of the literature reveals that most studies examining veterinary students' perceptions of distance education during the pandemic have focused on their satisfaction levels, the technical problems they experienced, and the lack of practical application; however, no studies have been found that examine their affective, cognitive, and symbolic experiences. For example, a systematic review study conducted on veterinary education during the pandemic period stated that the digital transformation in education accelerated, but students were not prepared for this transformation in a pedagogical context (Salazar & Miglino, 2022). However, this study did not conduct a metaphorical and experimental investigation into students' perceptions. Furthermore, other studies measured students' technical competence and satisfaction levels (Mahdy & Sayed, 2021; Mohamed et al., 2022); emotional contexts were not examined. It has been observed that a significant portion of the studies examining veterinary students' attitudes towards distance education have made interpretations based on quantitative data (Mahdy, 2020; Mahdy & Sayed, 2021). This has relatively limited the consideration of students' affective contexts through in-depth interpretation.

The use of metaphors in an educational context is considered an effective tool for helping students concretize abstract concepts, phenomena, and events, thereby reflecting the current situation (Alan, 2021). A review of the current literature reveals a lack of metaphor-based research, creating a significant gap in understanding how veterinary students felt about the distance education processes implemented during the pandemic and what mental images they used to reflect on this process. For example, although such studies exist in the fields of medicine and teaching (Yılmaz & Sönmez, 2022), the absence of such a study in the field of veterinary science within the applied sciences has been seen as a limitation in the context of educational structures for students in related fields.

Research Aim

The research aims to examine veterinary students' perceptions of distance education during the pandemic through the metaphors they used. Accordingly, the fundamental research question of this research is: “What metaphors did veterinary students use to express their distance education experiences during the pandemic, and in what contexts did these metaphors reflect their perceptions of the distance education process?”

Method

Research Design

Within the scope of the research, the phenomenological approach, one of the qualitative research methods, has been adopted. The reason for this is the need to clearly present the phenomena that the participants in the research frequently encounter but need to be interpreted (Creswell, 2013; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). Accordingly, veterinary students' perceptions of distance education processes are examined as a phenomenon, utilizing student metaphors in this process.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to determine the participants. With this method, the researcher selects participants who are easily accessible, thereby facilitating the process (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). Data was collected from 254 veterinary students within the scope of the study. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Before filling out the form to convey their metaphors, participants indicated that they were voluntarily participating in the study; no identity data was requested on the form within the scope of the study. Accordingly, students were asked to convey their perceptions of taking their courses remotely during the pandemic through metaphors. The participants were veterinary students studying at 17 different universities. As shown in Table 1, 59% of the participants were female and 41% were male; 68% were from the university where the researcher worked, and 32% were from other universities. In addition, the participants were from different class levels.

Table 1
Participants' Demografic Information

Variable	Option	f	%
Gender	Female	149	59
	Male	105	41
University	Researcher's	173	68
	Others	81	32
Graduate Class	1	82	32
	2	67	26
	3	51	20
	4	32	13
	5	22	9
	Total	254	

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection tool was distributed to volunteer students as an open-ended form. The data collection tool consists of two sections. The first section contains the form instructions, followed by the collection of students' demographic data. The second section contains two open-ended questions asking for the reason behind the metaphor and a text box. Metaphor request: "Describe your distance learning experience during the pandemic using a metaphor." Metaphor explanation request: "Explain your metaphor." The collected data were analyzed using content analysis. Content analysis involves coding the data obtained according to their similarities and differences in specific contexts, identifying themes, and making the necessary adjustments (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). During this process, the metaphors and explanations shared by participants were carefully read, and expressions with similar meanings were coded. These codes were divided into subcategories, and the subcategories were grouped under main categories at the end. During the analysis process, with the support of a field expert, labeling was done in the context of common views for codes and categories.

Validity and Reliability

The data was collected in a virtual environment on a voluntary basis; it was stated that participants' personal data would not be shared directly, and that none of the data they submitted within the scope of the research would be used outside the scope of the research. The inclusion of 254 participants in the research will strongly ensure data saturation. This is because the data collected from a large number of participants will enable the phenomenon to be clearly identified (Patton, 2014). The fact that one of the researchers conducting the study has experience in qualitative research will have a positive impact on the reliability of the study (Bashir et al., 2008). In addition, the opinions of two different experts were sought regarding the research design, data collection tool, and analysis process; the final version of the process was structured based on their recommendations. Thus, the research was

strengthened through peer debriefing (Creswell, 2013). An independent coder was also included in the coding process of metaphor explanations. The percentage of agreement between the categories identified by the coders was examined and determined to be 84%. As stated by Miles and Huberman (1994), since the percentage of agreement was above 80%, the categories were reported.

Findings

The metaphors expressed by 254 veterinary students regarding distance education were examined. In this context, a total of 188 metaphors emerged, 155 of which were unique. Subcategories were determined by considering the students' explanations of the metaphors along with the metaphors themselves. Some repeated metaphors were addressed within different subcategories based on the students' explanations. Following the analysis, 22 subcategories were identified. These subcategories were grouped under three main categories: ‘education process’, ‘instructional gains’, and ‘student status’. As shown in Table 2, the ‘education process’ category consists of 89 metaphors and accounts for 35% of all metaphors. Another category with high frequency is ‘instructional gains’. This category contains 86 metaphors, accounting for 34% of all metaphors. Finally, ‘student status’ consists of 79 metaphors, covering 31% of all metaphors.

Table 2
Categories and Subcategories

Categories	Subcategories	f	%
Education Process	Effort Relaxing Supportive Inclusive/protective Suppressive Challenging Chaos Inequality of opportunity Dilemma New order	89	35
Instructional Gains	Ineffective Telemedicine Nonfunctional Harm Efforts going to waste	86	34
Student Status	Hope Hopelessness Captivity Trapped feeling Anxiety Lack of motivation Loneliness	79	31

Education Process Category

The education progress category consists of 89 metaphors and 10 subcategories. Table 3 shows that the subcategories are divided into positive, negative, and other headings. There are a total of 40 metaphors conveying positive views, and the most frequent views in this category are grouped under the positive categories heading, accounting for 45%. The metaphors expressing positive views are grouped under four subcategories: ‘effort’, ‘reassuring’, ‘supportive’, and ‘inclusive/protective’. According to the metaphors mentioned in the subcategories, the highest concentration is seen in ‘effort’. It is also the most frequently referenced subcategory in the education process category.

Table 3
Subcategories and Metaphors of the Education Process Category

Qualifiers	Sub-categories	Metaphores	F	%
Positive Categories	Effort	Work (f:2), box (f:2), urgent and possible education, light bulb, computer, bicycle, striving, playing an instrument, awareness, hose (natural disaster), overheating computer, turtle, water-filled boat, wine, road, challenging marathon	18	20
	Relaxing	Comfort (f:3), family, looking at the glass half full, sea, daytime, cat, luxury, comfort and low cost	10	11
	Supportive	Change, sea, book, small water bottle, angel, compensation, wonder woman	7	8
	Inclusive/protective	Tree (f:2), life jacket, umbrella, space	5	6
		Total	40	45
Negative Categories	Oppressive	Neglect (f:2), a song (named: I Object - Müslüm Gürses), family, house cat, A novel (named: 1986 - George Orwell), glasses, toilet, robot, tautology	10	11
	Coercive	Cheetah and gazelle, mountain, sailboat on the sea, screen, physics class, modern disaster, ocean waves, rain	8	9
	Chaos	Chaos (f:2), black hole (f:2), rose, prison, complex	7	8
	Inequality of opportunity	Internet, materialism, street lamp, fish out of water, hen trying to lay eggs	5	6
	Dilemma	Cat (f:2), wet bathroom slippers and socks, necessity, fish caught on a hook	5	6
		Total	35	39
Other Category	New order	Computer (f:2), 2x, adaptation, experiment, vacuum cleaner, formality, laptop and internet, materialism, learning, erupting volcano, clock, virtual, plague	14	16
		General Total	89	100

The metaphors mentioned by students in the 'Effort' subcategory indicate that effort is important in distance education. In this context, they also expressed their responsibility. In their metaphors falling under the subcategories of 'reassuring', 'supportive', and 'inclusive/protective', students referred to the institutional support they received in the management and operation of the distance education process. Sample metaphors and explanations are as shown in Table 4.

Table 3 shows that the subcategories under the negative heading of the education process category consist of a total of 35 metaphors and are ranked second in the education process category with a rate of 39%. When the negative categories heading is examined, it is seen that they consist of five subcategories and 35 metaphors. The subcategories are, in order, 'oppressive', 'coercive', 'chaos', 'inequality of opportunity', and 'dilemma'. When the students' negative metaphors are examined, it is revealed that the 'oppressive' subcategory has the most metaphors, with 10.

Table 4
Some Metaphors and Explanations Under the Positive Heading of the Education Process Category

Subcategory	Student	Metaphor	Explanation
Effort	M002	Awareness	*"We need to be aware of the times we live in and do our best within certain limits."*
	M132	A challenging marathon	*"We need to work harder than usual to understand things."*
Relaxing	M134	Luxury	*"Because you can make up for any lessons you miss*

			whenever you want, you can watch them as many times as you like, and since there are no location restrictions, it's relaxed and comfortable."
Supportive	M011	Wonder woman	*"I believe this process has reawakened the inner strength within me that will help me grow."*
Inclusive/protective	M028	Life jacket	*"It can save your life in a difficult situation."*

Students generally referred to the difficulties of the process in the subcategories of 'challenging' and 'chaotic'. In the subcategory of 'inequality of opportunity', they generally mentioned the lack of opportunities. In the subcategory of 'dilemma', they referred to the uncertainties they thought they faced during the process. Sample metaphors and explanations are provided in Table 5.

Table 5
Some Metaphors and Explanations Under the Negative Heading of the Education Process Category

Subcategory	Student	Metaphor	Explanation
Oppressive	M105	House cat	*"My eyes are outside, but I can't go out; my owner won't let me."*
Coercive	M029	Sailboat on the sea	*"We are trying to find our way in difficult conditions."*
Chaos	M249	Chaos	*"A process filled with incredibly complex and unsolvable problems."*
Inequality of opportunity	M187	Street lamp	*"Teachers are doing everything they can to illuminate the street, but in the end, everything is dark and that light can't reach everywhere. Not every student can get under that lamp because resources are limited."*
Dilemma	M101	Fish caught on a hook	*"The fisherman can't pull us in, but we're not free either."*

Looking at the "other" category in Table 3, it is seen that students referred to the "new order" subcategory with 14 metaphors. The metaphors collected in this subcategory are directed towards the emergence of a new order in the distance education process. Sample metaphors and explanations are as shown in Table 6.

Table 6
Some Metaphors and Explanations Under Other Headings in the Education Process Category

Subcategory	Student	Metaphor	Explanation
New order	M015	2X	*"Accelerated education."*
	M059	Adaptation	*"As students, trying to adapt to the distance learning system we encountered for the first time, with its pros and cons, reminded me of this word."*

Instructional Gains Category

The Instructional gains category consists of 86 metaphors and 5 subcategories. Table 7 shows that the subcategories are grouped only under negative headings. These categories consist of the subcategories 'inefficient', 'telemedicine', 'ineffective', 'harmful', and 'wasted effort'. The vast majority of metaphors, 43%, fall under the 'inefficient' subcategory. This is followed by the 'telemedicine' subcategory with 19 metaphors and the 'ineffective' subcategory with 17 metaphors.

Table 7
Subcategories and Metaphors of the Instructional Gains Category

Qualifiers	Sub-categories	Metaphores	F	%

Negative Categories	Inefficient	Inadequacy (f:2), bear, a glass of water, easily damaged headphones, dead-end street, trash, dump, screen, deficiency, disabled person, creaking door, hallway lamp, deserted island, empty barrel, chaos, bridge, candle, unripe watermelon, protein-free red meat, disgrace, virtual, sound, zero, senna, social media, abstract, sponge, dry cow, rabbit, television, sleep, sleepless person, inefficiency, half-full glass, treadmill, necessity	37	43
	Telemedicine	Arab hair, baby, hell, a flower blooming in the desert, novice, lab rat, screen, disabled person, inequality, a veterinarian who has never touched an animal, both easy and difficult, black hole, sports commentator watching the game on a tube TV, a pine tree growing in a pot, saudade, education without application, inefficiency, star, learning to swim at home	19	22
	Inoperative	Empty space (f:5), tree, balloon, empty flour sack, inanimate object, muddy road, darkness, cat, watering a dry tree, cleaning cloth, Siberia, space, ruined building	17	20
	Damage	Fire, swamp, earthquake, wall, closed and rainy weather, building constructed on poor ground, Titanic	7	8
	Efforts going to waste	Six-hole box, love, balloon, filling a sieve with water, turtle, musicians playing the violin as the Titanic sank	6	7
		Total	86	100

Students indicated that they suffered harm in the instructional process under the 'harm' subcategory. Under the 'wasted effort' subcategory, they presented metaphors expressing that their efforts were not rewarded. Examples of metaphors and explanations related to the instructional gains category are presented in Table 8.

Table 8
Some Metaphors and Explanations Under the Negative Heading of the Instructional Gains Category

Subcategory	Student	Metaphor	Explanation
Inefficient	M001	Rabbit	*"Our classes seem to be going by faster, so it feels like the teaching process has accelerated, but I feel doomed to lose to the turtle."*
	M008	Dead end	*"We're on a path, but we don't know where it will lead. We're attending classes remotely, but we can't fully grasp what we see in class."*
Telemedicine	M083	Screen	*"I thought this description was appropriate because we're trying to become veterinarians based solely on theoretical knowledge learned from a screen, without any practical experience."*
	M183	Hell	*"Although our profession, like medicine or dentistry, requires direct communication with patients and practical application, we couldn't intervene with animals except during internships."*
Nonfunctional	M056	Muddy road	*"The more I try to take a step forward, the more I see that I can't move forward."*
	M071	Void	*"I can describe it as a void in the middle of my educational life."*
Harm	M172	"Titanic	*"We hit an iceberg; we haven't sunk completely yet, but we've started to sink."*

Efforts going to waste	M180	Balloon	*"I don't think what we're learning now is quality information, and I believe the knowledge we're gaining will fade away soon. Because, in my opinion, practical lessons cannot be taught to a person in this way in a healthy manner."*

Student Status Category

The student status category consists of 79 metaphors and 7 subcategories. Table 9 shows that the subcategories are grouped under positive and negative headings. However, only one subcategory, 'hope', is found under the positive heading, and only five metaphors refer to hope in a positive way. There are a total of 74 metaphors expressing negative views, which constitute a 94% majority in the student status category. The relevant metaphors are found in six subcategories. These are 'helplessness', 'captivity', 'entrapment', 'anxiety', 'lack of motivation' and 'loneliness'. The example metaphors and explanations under the positive heading in the student status category are as shown in Table 10.

Table 9
Subcategories and Metaphors of the Student Status Category

Subcategory	Student	Metaphor	F	%
Positive Category	Hope	Storm, prison, butterfly cocoon, tunnel, hope	5	6
Negative Categories	Hopelessness	Emptiness (f:4), disappointment (f:2), depression, helplessness, storm, night, cage, black hole, pessimism and fear, ocean, tourist, hopelessness, a baby shoe in space, volcano	18	23
	Captivity	Prison (f:5), cage (f:4), prisoner (f:3), bird in a cage (f:2), penitentiary, slave, bird, bars	18	23
	Trappedness	Cage (f:2), darkness (f:2), box (f:2), rag doll, whirlpool, trap, quarantine, prisoner, shackles, chain	13	16
	Anxiety	Uncertainty (f:2), fog (f:2), foggy weather (f:2), anxiety, worry, a kite with a broken string, a tunnel with no end in sight, a struggle with no outcome, a flying balloon	12	15
	Lack of motivation	Animal lying beside a flowing stream, emptiness, depression, yesterday's leftovers, shattered enthusiasm, prisoner, money but no peace, clock, space	9	11
	Loneliness	Antisocial, screen, loneliness, zombie	4	5
		Total	74	94
		General Total	79	100

The majority of metaphors under the negative heading are grouped under the subcategories of 'helplessness' and 'captivity'. There are 18 metaphors in each category. Students referred to the limited learning process and opportunities in the 'stuck' subcategory. Metaphors related to their concerns about the possibility of inadequate learning conditions were placed in the "anxiety" subcategory, metaphors related to their low desire to learn were placed in the "lack of motivation" subcategory, and metaphors related to the loneliness they felt during the learning process were placed in the "loneliness" subcategory. Examples of metaphors and explanations related to the student status category are presented in Table 11.

Table 10
Some Metaphors and Explanations Under the Positive Heading of the Student Status Category

Subcategory	Student	Metaphor	Explanation

Hope	M068	Tunnel	*"The road is dark, but the light is not far away."*
	M092	Butterfly cocoon	*"I want to think that the earth and people are in a state of change, transformation, and development."*

Table 11
Some Metaphors and Explanations Under the Negative Heading of the Student Status Gains Category

Subcategory	Student	Metaphor	Explanation
Helplessness	M016	Night	*"Because I see my future and my education as so bleak."*
	M139	Closing	*"I feel trapped and helpless, thinking I won't be able to go back to school and will graduate without getting enough education."*
Captivity	M120	Bird in a cage	*"Because I'm confined within certain limits instead of being where I should be, and I'm missing out on learning many important things that I should be learning outside."*
	M182	Prison	*"I feel like my freedom has been taken away."*
Trappedness	M149	Trash man	*"Because the trash man only has a body and no clothes or anything. I am exactly the same. I set out on a path, but I lack the things that would make me better equipped."*
Anxiety	M234	Foggy weather	*"We can see what lies ahead in the near future, but we don't know what problems it will bring us in the long run. It's not productive to read papers from a distance without touching, smelling, or thinking in detail."*
Lack of motivation	M038	Emptiness	*"This situation we find ourselves in is a moment when we can't do anything enthusiastically, when we feel insecure."*
Loneliness	M116	Loneliness	*"Friends, lovers, teachers, coworkers, sincerity, connections, meetings, conversations, laughter, happiness, sadness... none of it exists. There is nothing that will make me who I am, that will add value to me."*

Discussion, Conclusion, and Suggestions

The 188 metaphors analyzed revealed three main categories. These categories are, in order, 'education process', 'instructional gains', and 'student status'. The 'education process' category covers students' general perceptions of how educational processes work; 'instructional gains' covers the nature of the gains they achieve at the end of the teaching process; and 'student status' covers their feelings throughout this process.

When examining the 'education process' category, it was observed that metaphors could be classified under positive, negative, and other headings. The metaphors were grouped under 10 subcategories. There were four subcategories under the positive heading, five under the negative heading, and one under the other heading. The positive heading includes the subcategories 'effort', 'reassuring', 'supportive', and 'inclusive/protective'. The metaphors conveyed by the students emphasize that they feel protected in the institutional context of the educational process and that their individual efforts are also important. The "new order" metaphors expressed by the students show that they perceive the distance education they experienced during the pandemic not as a temporary process, but rather as permanent, viewing it as a paradigm shift. As Stojan et al. (2022) also noted, hybrid and distance learning processes are expected to gain dominance in fields such as medicine and veterinary science. Under the negative heading, the subcategories 'oppressive', 'coercive', 'chaos', 'inequality of opportunity', and 'dilemma' are listed in order. In these metaphors, students mostly referred to the difficulties, chaos, and lack of opportunities they experienced during the process. The subcategory 'new order' under the other subheading that emerged from the student metaphors refers to distance education bringing a new meaning to students' learning experiences in educational processes. Overall, when the metaphors under this category are evaluated, it is understood that students have different

views on the management of the process and do not converge in a particular direction in the general context. Students' positive and negative judgments about the distance education process have been supported by similar studies. For example, they have described it as both 'liberating' and 'isolating' (Alan, 2021; Kan & Özmen, 2024).

Examining the 'Instructional gains' category, it is observed that all metaphors within this category are considered in a negative context. There are five subcategories within this category. These are 'inefficient', 'telemedicine', 'ineffective', 'harm', and 'wasted effort'. Students particularly emphasized that the fact that veterinary medicine, as an applied science, was conducted entirely through distance education hindered their ability to gain experience. Therefore, they stated that there were significant obstacles in terms of the retention of the theoretical knowledge they learned during the process and its reflection in practice. Similarly, the literature indicates that veterinary students have expressed that they are deprived of observation and practice-based learning opportunities in distance education courses (Hadian & Dalir-Naghadeh, 2025; Mahdy, 2020). All these findings are consistent with the perception of 'incomplete competence' expressed by Ryan et al. (2022). Veterinary students have indicated that they lack practice-based learning due to the inadequacy of digital environments (Routh et al., 2021).

When examining the 'student status' category, both positive and negative headings were observed. However, within the positive heading, only the 'hope' subcategory was present. However, it was observed that the majority used negative metaphors in the 'student status' category. In this regard, six categories emerged: 'helplessness', 'captivity', 'entrapment', 'anxiety', 'lack of motivation', and 'loneliness'. The relevant subcategories reflect the pressure, anxiety, and loneliness that students generally feel during the process. Overall, when the metaphors under this category are evaluated, it can be understood that students do not feel free and motivated. Similarly, Hassan et al. (2022) stated that students defined distance education as 'digital stress' and 'remote loneliness.' This situation has also led to various effects such as a decrease in students' feelings of exhaustion and belonging. Some studies have found that students' descriptions of school as a 'prison' and 'empty classroom' are significant indicators of emotional disconnection (Vural et al., 2022; Yıldız et al., 2021). All these results highlight the need to restructure support processes in psychosocial, technical, and pedagogical contexts. In this context, it is necessary to structure educational processes that prioritize all learner-centered processes (Hao et al., 2022).

The following suggestions, which may guide future research, are listed below based on the results obtained within the scope of the study:

- In disciplines requiring practical application, such as veterinary medicine, it is important to incorporate clinical experience into educational platforms (Nejadghaderi et al., 2024). Various virtual simulations and augmented reality applications can also enhance students' practical experience and support skill acquisition.
- Peer support groups, psychological counseling services, and social interaction areas can be established to reduce the feelings of loneliness and burnout experienced by students during the pandemic due to distance education (Ross et al., 2020).
- Regularly analyzing students' metaphorical perceptions in relation to currently conducted courses or technology-supported educational processes may be important in terms of enabling the tracking of emotional and cognitive changes that are likely to occur in teaching processes (Vahdani-Sanavi & Demirkol, 2024).
- Planning and implementing in-service training for teaching staff to enable them to use digital tools effectively and efficiently in an educational context, thereby allowing students to gain more from the process, can be effective (Stojan et al., 2022).

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Data were collected and analyzed solely within the scope of metaphor analysis. A thorough investigation to ensure data diversity by collecting veterinary students' experiences of the process using different types of data collection tools was not conducted.

As the research was conducted during the pandemic period of distance education, the findings reflect the conditions specific to that period and do not cover perceptions that may change over time.

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Disclosure Statements

Contribution rate statement of the researchers:

The author conducted the whole study.

Conflict of interest statement:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

Fulya Torun: Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data analysis, writing – review & editing.

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Ethical Declaration and Committee Approval

In this research, the principles of scientific research and publication ethics were followed.