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Some Trends in Islamic Education Forming Spiritual and Cultural Values of the Youth under the Influence of COVID-19 (the Experience of Madrasah Colleges in the Republic of Kazakhstan)

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Abstract

This study focuses on the spiritual and cultural aspects of education and upbringing in specialized Kazakh Islamic Madrasah colleges before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors used mixed methods research approach for studying trends, including the analysis of documents and interviews with teachers and experts in the field of Islamic education, as well as students of Islamic educational institutions. The results show that Islamic spiritual and cultural education in the Republic of Kazakhstan has a traditional methodology and is difficult to radically change. A survey of students and teachers reveals several problems that they face in online learning and the impacts of distance learning on the quality of education and upbringing. In conclusion, the study emphasizes the need for further research on Islamic education in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan, with due regard to the regional and global events of recent years that have adjusted the methodology of education and upbringing.

Keywords: islamic education, spirituality, culture, pandemic, Madrasah college.

1. Introduction

In the modern world, where globalization and technological progress become increasingly important (Degtev et al., 2022), the preservation and development of the spiritual and cultural heritage is a key task (Otrokov et al., 2023). In this context, Kazakh Madrasah colleges play a crucial role in forming the spiritual and cultural education of young people. Under the COVID-19 restrictions, the educational process and the models of Islamic education have undergone a major transformation. Therefore, it is relevant to preserve and develop spiritual and cultural education in the Madrasah colleges of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Janguzhiyev et al., 2023; Burova et al., 2023).

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In the process of learning, teachers and students of Islamic educational institutions face several tasks which can be solved by the formation and institutionalization of religious education; the solutions prove themselves as effective methods for the fastest achievement of the educational goals set (Aleksandrova et al., 2023). However, the COVID-19 restrictions revealed that these traditional methods were mainly connected with the social component and personal contact between teachers and students (Yakimova et al., 2023; Gerasimova et al., 2023). Therefore, their effectiveness is seriously reduced during the period of social distancing.

Many scholars consider the issues of Islamic spiritual and cultural education and upbringing. Among studies in this area, we should highlight the works by Z. Sardar and J. Henzell-Thomas (2017) and M. Zaman and N. Memon (2016). These authors propose a new approach to Islamic education based on the integration of knowledge and the importance of religion in student education. Z. Zainud and L. Hakim (2020) describes the influence of religious culture on the development of students' educational abilities and the increase of competence and competitiveness in their field. This approach consists of the implementation of religious values through various activities, including curricular and extracurricular activities. J. Bolhari and M. Mohsenikabir (2019) and M. Bagherpur et al. (2022) examine the influence of spiritual and cultural qualities on one's integration into the educational and professional environment.

Among Kazakh scholars, we should mention N.L. Seitakhmetova (2009), B.M. Satershinov (2017), M.K. Bektenova et al. (2017), R.R. Yusupov (2016), T.E. Sedankina (2013), and I.S. Mavlyautdinov (2007). Their research is concerned with the philosophy of religion, Islamic values, and cultural characteristics of the inhabitants of the post-Soviet countries and Central Asia. It laid the foundation for further research and development in the field of spiritual and cultural education in Kazakh Madrasah colleges.

Despite the previous studies of a general nature and a review of the existing issues in religious education, the conceptual approach to forming spiritual and cultural values of young people under the influence of Islamic education in a secular society has not been fully disclosed.

Therefore, the study aims at assessing the impact of trends in Islamic education in Kazakh Madrasah colleges, with due regard to the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, on the formation of the spiritual and cultural values of young people.

2. Methods

Considering the research objective, we applied mixed research approach using the methods of philosophical and religious science: comparative analysis, field research, quantitative analysis of the questionnaire survey using the chi-square test, content analysis, and data processing. The study was conducted from December 14, 2022 to April 26, 2023.

We studied the trends of Islamic education in secondary educational institutions in Kazakhstan during three time periods: pre-pandemic; during the COVID-19 restrictions; after the pandemic.

In the first stage, we analyzed documents and reviewed relevant literature, including scientific articles, research reports, and government documents regulating the requirements for secondary Islamic educational institutions in Kazakhstan.

In the second stage, we conducted face-to-face interviews with experts, including scholars and faculty staff of Madrasah colleges, as well as an online sociological survey of students using the All Counted system to identify the pros and cons of online learning and attitudes toward new forms of education.

We selected the respondents from among students of Madrasah colleges considering their period of enrollment in an Islamic educational institution. The main criterion for sampling for a sociological survey was the period of admission from 2019 to 2020. At the time of the survey, the respondents were in their senior year and some were already completing their studies. All respondents had experience in both online distance learning and traditional offline learning.

The survey consisted of several questions related to online learning and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the quality of education. The specific questions included in the analysis were:

"What are the advantages of online learning?"

"How did the pandemic affect the quality of education?"

"What are the disadvantages of online education?"

"Are there more pros or cons of distance education?"

"Which is better: online or offline education?"

The data collected for each question were categorized and expressed as percentages.

In the third stage, we analyzed interviews with the experts and the results of the online survey using content analysis methods.

Also when analyzing the answers we have employed the Chi-Square Test to examine the association between variables in the context of Islamic education in Madrasah colleges. The test was applied to analyze the data collected through surveys conducted among students of Madrasah colleges in Kazakhstan. A significance level of 0.05 was chosen to evaluate the results.

The analysis was conducted using appropriate statistical software, taking into account the assumptions of the Chi-Square Test and the independence of variables. The results were interpreted based on the p-values obtained from the test.

3 Results

3.1. Islamic Education in Central Asia: History and Pre-Pandemic Trends in the Spiritual and Cultural Education of Students at Madrasah Colleges

The system of Islamic education in Central Asia has undergone significant changes over the years, reflecting the historical and modern context of the region. In the pre-Soviet era, Islamic education was mainly provided through Madrasah religious schools that taught Islamic theology, law, and literature. These colleges were often associated with Sufi orders that emphasized spiritual development and devotion to Allah. The Soviet era, which lasted from the 1920s to the 1990s, had a profound effect on Islamic education in Central Asia. The Soviet authorities pursued a policy aimed at the secularization of society, including the destruction of various religious institutions, the suppression of religious activity, the ban on rituals, and the promotion of atheism. The Soviet regime also persecuted Sufi orders which were viewed as a threat to Communism because they provided religious education despite the closure of Islamic educational institutions. This led to the persecution of Sufi leaders and the destruction of Sufi shrines and mosques (Temirbayev, Temirbayeva, 2023; Zhapekova et al., 2020).

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in vocational education at Madrasah colleges as they have been playing an important role in the spiritual and cultural life of Kazakhstan since the 19th century (Smagulov, 2018). Today the government is investing in the modernization and development of Islamic education. There are currently nine Madrasah colleges in Kazakhstan.

The Kazakh model of Islamic religious education at Madrasah colleges is notable since these are registered republican educational institutions that have a state license for education from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Muftyat). The educational process is organized by such a religious republican association as the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kazakhstan. The term of study is three years, after which a state diploma is issued in the specialty “Islamic Studies”, “Imam-Khatib”, or “Teacher of the Fundamentals of Islam” (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan) (Ministry of Education..., 2022; Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2007).

In essence, modern Madrasah colleges of Central Asia, including such educational institutions in Kazakhstan, are the successors of traditional Madrasah schools originating in the Middle Ages (a logical extension of the former education system). An example of synthesis and continuity was the House of Wisdom or the Academy (Bayt al-Hikmah and later Dar al-Hikmah) founded by caliph Al-Ma'mun in the 820s. It covered all spheres of life and social needs: political, economic, social, humanitarian, spiritual, cultural, educational, etc.

Based on the analysis of the works of medieval scholars (Nurull-Khodzhaeva, 2018), the transfer of knowledge and methodology did not depend on any institutional structures (or formal systems established by the authorities). The unique institutional scheme was based on the teacher's authority and was determined by the relationship between teachers and students. The basis of Islamic education is the concept of “ijāz” and the “connecting thread” of the intellectual elite (preserving social solidarity), including the personal and informal transfer of knowledge between teachers and students.

Based on this understanding of educational principles, curricula were built and projects arose to create and develop institutionalized education. This is how the three main foundations of professionalism in the Islamic philosophy of education were formed:

- The social organization of research and teaching guilds;
- The establishment of a special discussion method in the process of teaching and learning;
- A professional license to teach (a modern diploma equal to a doctoral dissertation).

The medieval philosophy of education in Islam was based on this triad, the identity of the members of intellectual guilds was formed, and devotion was developed rather to the teacher than to the educational system as a whole. According to traditions (emphasized by ibn Sīnā), the process of acquiring knowledge should be life-long (the interpretation of the Platonic teachings) and represent the ultimate goal of a Muslim.

Due to the above-mentioned conditions, a more complicated link is added to the school (Arabic: maktab or kuttāb), which is gradually integrated into the system of mosques (in some of them) and partially replaces libraries as centers of learning. This is how Madrasah colleges were established (Arabic: “a place where one studies”). Approximately from the middle of the 11th century, the influence of the House of Wisdom (and other institutions of this kind) was gradually decreasing.

In the course of these transformations, the key goal of Islamic pedagogy was highlighted, i.e. the education of virtue (Al-Qurtubi, 2003; Nurull-Khodzhaeva, 2018). All Madrasah colleges of Kazakhstan focus on this goal that was achieved through classical forms of learning and teaching Islamic sciences and instilling its values into the youth (Ofitsialnyi sait DUMK, 2023). In modern society, where spiritual values and culture are of much importance, spiritual and cultural education becomes the most important component of the upbringing of young generations.

3.2. Methods of Religious Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Obtaining an academic degree at a Madrasah college is a traditional way for many Muslims, allowing them to acquire in-depth knowledge of Islam and its fundamental principles, and is one of the important components in the life of the Muslim community in Kazakhstan. However, given the changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, the traditional methods of Islamic religious education in Madrasah colleges faced several challenges.

One of the main challenges is maintaining social distance to prevent the spread of the virus (Nasution et al., 2022). As a result, Madrasah colleges could not accept students in their classrooms and switched to a distance learning format. However, distance learning proved its ineffectiveness in terms of spiritual and cultural development since Islamic religious education includes not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills and non-verbal methods of communication and interconnection. For example, Madrasah students should know how to properly pray in mosques and perform other religious rites, instruct parishioners, and interact with society and their environment. These skills cannot be acquired through distance learning and require their physical presence in a classroom or a place of worship.

After enrolling at Madrasah colleges, students from other regions are provided with a place in a hostel, where they spend their free time. For the most part, the educational process is carried out outside school hours by a mentor who monitors the internal order and student interaction, holds collective prayers, and fulfills the rules of living in the hostel. Thus, it helps students to adapt and evaluate the manifestation of the Islamic spiritual and cultural values instilled in the learning process. Many students of Madrasah colleges exchange views and discuss problems in live communication, which helps them better understand the theology of Islam. Being physically present at a Madrasah college also helps students develop the leadership qualities they need after graduation and strengthen their moral principles.

In turn, online learning has led to a lack of moral support and interaction between students and teachers. Within the traditional model of Islamic education, it is important to educate a person and promote spiritual and moral values through education, based on the personal example of a mentor.

In the traditional methodology of teaching Islamic theology, the whole process is based on the study of not only the Quran and the Sunnah but also classical theological texts (matns) (Kaliyev et al., 2023). Therefore, it is difficult to understand these texts without the teacher’s assistance and even more challenging to learn spiritual and moral concepts to use them in modern realities. The teacher is entrusted with the function of explaining the meanings of these scriptures and organizing the educational process so that students can learn the full spiritual and moral essence of the religious topics presented.

Thus, the restrictions caused by COVID-19 revealed a wide range of problems in the conservative methodology of Islamic education and a lack of readiness for modern trends and societal demands in the field of mobility and sociability.

Another problem associated with distance learning was the lack of developed and tested Islamic online courses and resources prepared in the Kazakh language, as well as their availability.

The latter are kept in paper form and are not suitable for online learning. Many students of Madrasah colleges did not have access to the Internet, laptops, or other digital technologies for one reason or another (there is no Internet in all settlements, especially in rural areas, and some students were from extended or low-income families, etc.). This significantly limited the ability of students to access the necessary electronic resources and study the material together with the teacher. As a result, the effectiveness of education decreased.

3.3. Pros and Cons of Online Education

Answering the first question “What are the advantages of online learning?”, the respondents mostly described online education as modern and accessible, rather than convenient. As a result of the survey, the majority (34.64 %) highlighted the modernity of this approach, and 27.93 % focused on negative aspects of online learning or no awareness of this format (Figure 1).

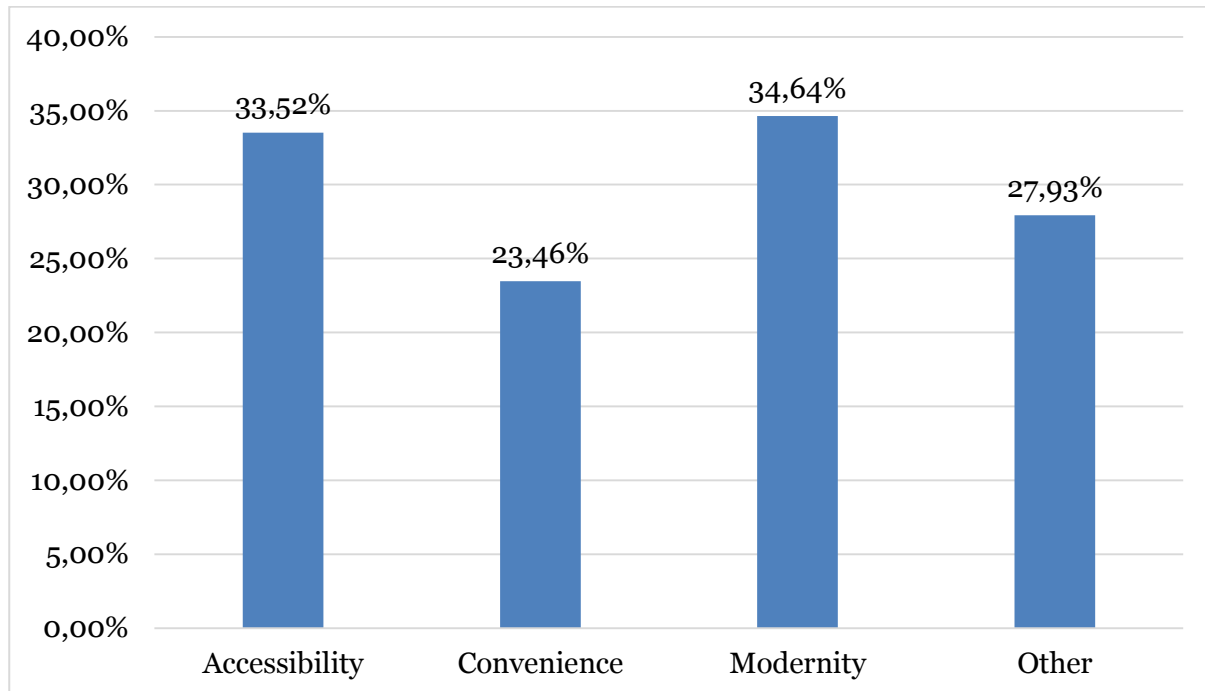


Fig. 1. Answers of the respondents from students of Madrasah colleges to the question “What are the advantages of online learning?”, %

Based on the results of the Figure 1 a significant association was found between the categories of advantages of online learning ($\chi^2 = 8.19$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.042$). The categories "Accessibility," "Convenience," and "Modernity" showed varying proportions, indicating a significant difference in the perceived advantages of online learning among the respondents.

A similar question was asked to the expert community and teachers during interviews. While answering the question “What are the advantages of online learning?”, some experts and teachers highlighted the convenience of communication and obtaining additional information, improving skills; quick access to lectures by world-class specialists; modernity; alternative online education; the faster process of mastering new technologies and online educational platforms.

Despite positive feedback about the new teaching methods, a negative opinion about online education and its impact on the spiritual and cultural component of the personality prevailed among the answers of the students surveyed. This statement was reflected in the answers of the students of Madrasah colleges to the question “How did the pandemic affect the quality of education?” (Figure 2).

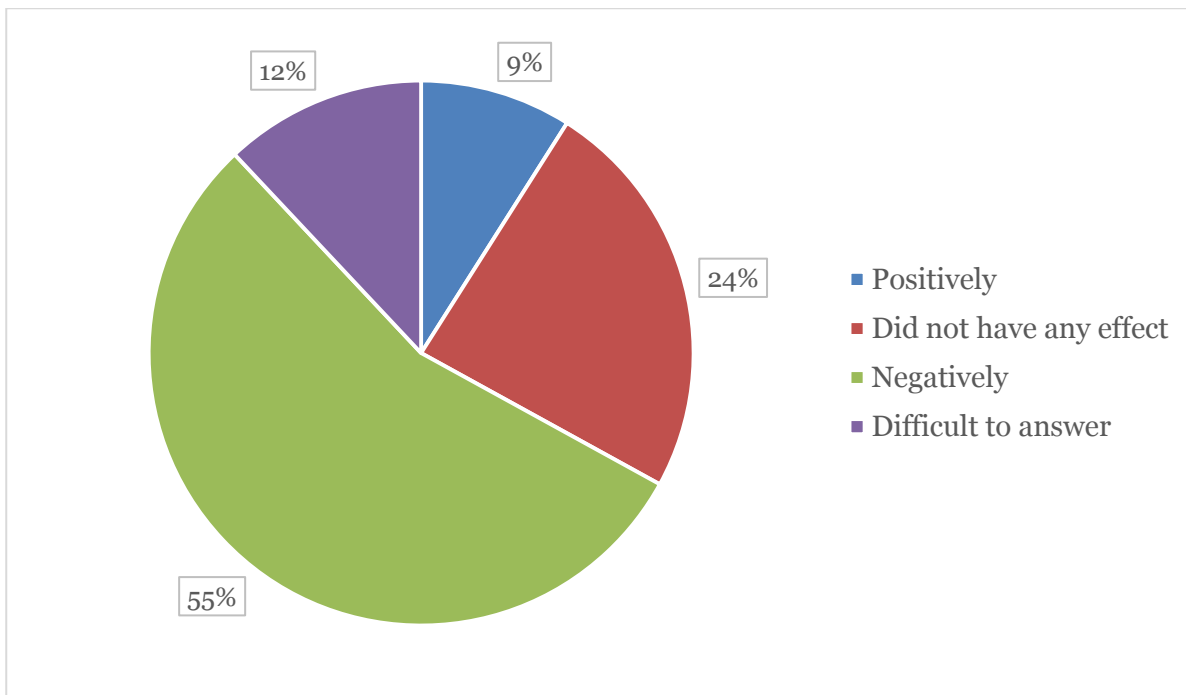


Fig. 2. Answers of the respondents from students of Madrasah colleges to the question “How did the pandemic affect the quality of education?”, %

The vast majority of the students (55 %) answered “negatively”, while 9% of the respondents considered that the pandemic and the transition to online learning had a positive impact on the quality of their education.

The impact of the pandemic on the quality of education showed a significant association among the categories ($\chi^2 = 47.81$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$). The majority of respondents indicated a negative impact on the quality of education, while a smaller proportion reported a positive impact or no effect.

One of the main disadvantages of online learning is the impossibility of direct contact between students and teachers. As practice shows, communication with teachers, colleagues, and peers is crucial for the formation of spiritual and cultural values. In online learning, students lose this opportunity, which can affect the quality of their education and the formation of spiritual and cultural values. This conditions the next disadvantage of online learning, namely, a limited opportunity to gain practical skills and experience. Since online learning is mainly focused on theoretical knowledge, the spiritual and cultural values of students are limited to theory and not supported by practice. Without practice, it is difficult to develop skills in such subjects taught at Madrasah colleges as the interpretation of the Holy texts and the recitation of the Quran (tajwid), Islamic morality (ahlak), preaching (dagva), communal prayer (du'aa') before the start of the meal, etc. For the most part, these subjects are better mastered through joint practice, exchange of experience, and discussion. The lack of practice makes it difficult to obtain virtuous qualities inherent in a well-developed person (al-insan al-kamil). Students might not get the relevant experience and practical skills, which affects their future work and the formation of Islamic spiritual and cultural values.

Another disadvantage of online education is the lack of personal contact between students and their mentors and guardians, which can negatively affect the formation of Islamic spiritual and cultural values. This is evidenced by the answers of the students to the question “What are the disadvantages of online learning?” (Figure 3).

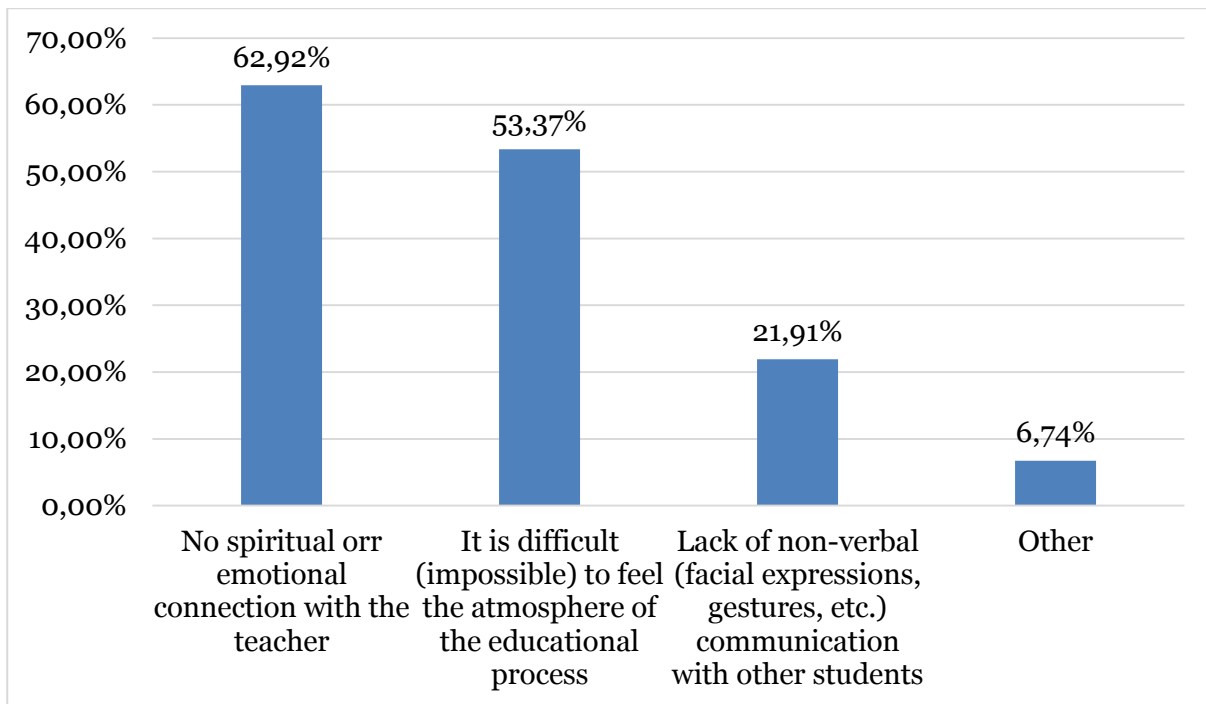


Fig. 3. Answers of the respondents from students of Madrasah colleges to the question “What are the disadvantages of online education?”, %

An association was found between the categories of disadvantages of online education ($\chi^2 = 35.59$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$). The categories "No spiritual or emotional connection with the teacher" (63 %) and "Difficult to feel the atmosphere of the educational process" (53 %) were identified as the major disadvantages reported by the respondents.

According to 22 % of the respondents, another disadvantage of online learning is the lack of non-verbal (facial expressions, gestures, etc.) communication with other students. This also has a negative impact on the assimilation of the acquired knowledge and materials in both spiritual and emotional terms.

When answering the question “What are the disadvantages of online learning?”, the experts and teachers emphasized the lack of feelings and visible perception of the data received by students since the monitor cannot transmit these signs. Within the educational process, spiritual, emotional, and non-verbal contact is established between teachers and students, which provides the mentor with feedback. According to the experts, distance education violates and breaks this connection between teachers and students. If the goals set are not achieved and students do not understand the materials given, the mentor can give another example that describes the issue in more detail or ask a clarifying question to assess the understanding of the topic under discussion.

3.4. Post-COVID Trends in Islamic Education

The pandemic has had a profound effect on how Madrasah colleges approach spiritual education. A key trend is a greater emphasis on online education. The administration of Madrasah colleges invested in new technology and developed online courses for students who could not attend their classes in person. This has opened up new opportunities for students, especially those who live in remote areas or are in outpatient care.

One more trend that has emerged in spiritual education is an increased focus on self-learning and self-development. Madrasah colleges introduce extracurricular activities and elements of self-development and self-improvement under the guidance of a mentor. This is due to the changing needs of society, as well as the principle of life-long learning. Madrasah colleges also place more emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This is reflected in the development of new courses that include ethics, logic, and reasoning. Courses are designed to help students develop the skills they need to deal with complex social and spiritual challenges.

According to the survey about learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the results were distributed as follows (Figure 4).

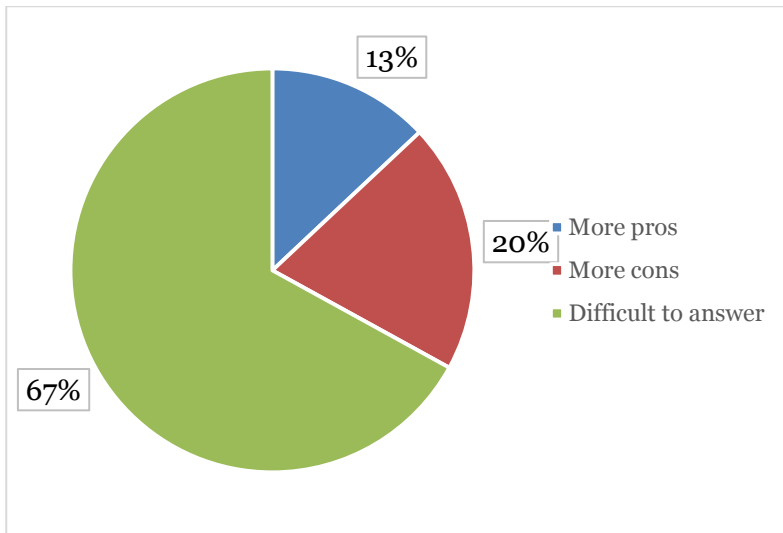


Fig. 4. Answers of the respondents from students of Madrasah colleges to the question “Are there more pros or cons of distance education?”, %

A significant association was observed among the categories of pros and cons of distance education ($\chi^2 = 33.29$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$). The majority of respondents perceived more cons than pros associated with distance education.

After comparing these data with the received answers to the question “Which is better: online or offline education?” (Figure 5), we concluded that online learning can be an alternative form of education in religious educational institutions of Kazakhstan (the adoption of blended learning).

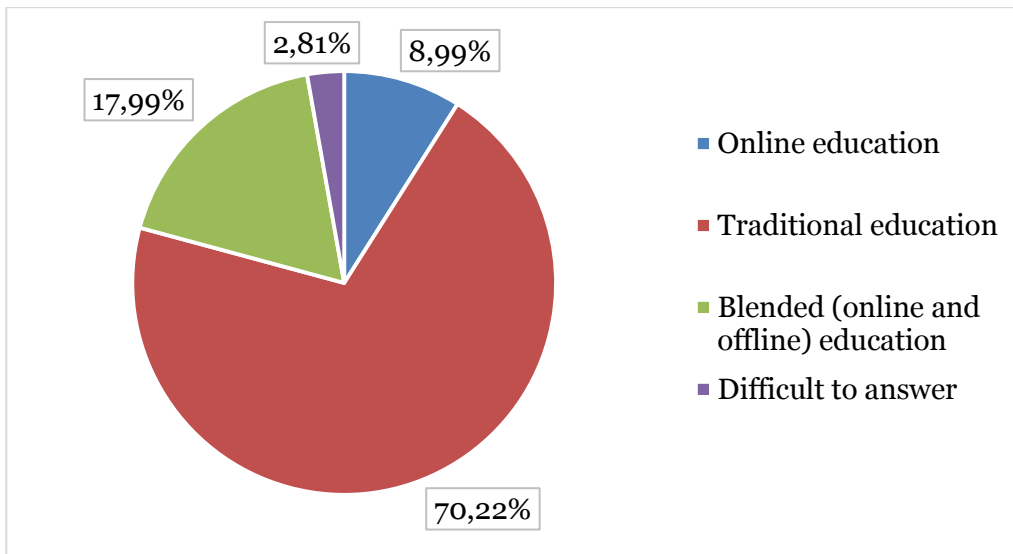


Fig. 5. Answers of the respondents from students of Madrasah colleges to the question “Which is better: online or offline education?”, %

Significant differences were found among the categories of preferences for online or offline education ($\chi^2 = 95.12$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$). Traditional offline education was preferred by the majority of respondents, while a smaller proportion expressed a preference for blended (online and offline) education.

Although 70 % of the students surveyed at Madrasah colleges prefer the traditional offline form of education, 18 % of the respondents supported blended (online and offline) Islamic education, and only 9 % of the students supported online learning.

The introduction of blended education might become acceptable when mastering general educational disciplines or additional subjects. Thus, the experts and teachers of Madrasah colleges were not against the introduction of online education into non-Islamic and non-theological

subjects, for example, world history and Kazakh history, self-knowledge, information and communications technologies, etc. Since they do not have a direct impact on the formation of religious values and Islamic culture, they do not require direct emotional and spiritual contact between teachers and students.

In addition, alternative education is a sign of respect for the rights of all participants in the educational process. If individuals need it, the right to choose must be respected. This reflects one of the important principles of Islam, i.e. the availability of education for everyone.

To achieve high academic performance at Madrasah colleges, managers and teachers ask them to hand over smartphones on school days and return their gadgets on weekends. This originates from the classical model of religious education when nothing should distract students from the educational process. This method has both its pros (focus on the educational process, no external distractions and irritants) and cons (blinker vision in terms of information, no readiness for modern challenges of the globalizing world).

4. Discussion

We studied the influence of trends in Islamic education on the formation of spiritual and cultural values of young people with due regard to the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The vast majority of scholars ([Bagherpur et al., 2022](#); [Bolhari, Mohsenikabir, 2019](#); [Sardar, Henzell-Thomas, 2017](#); [Seitakhmetova, 2009](#); [Yahya, Rahmat, 2021](#); [Zainud, Hakim, 2020](#); [Zaman, Memon, 2016](#)) adheres to our opinion about the impossibility of instilling spirituality and Islamic culture in students without educational practices and personal communication with each student. The student's satisfaction with distance learning is not always considered ([Jeong, Chung, 2023](#)).

A change in goals toward the creation of a competent graduate can lead to a decrease in attention to spiritual and cultural values. In this regard, it is necessary to develop strategies that will maintain a balance between spiritual and cultural values and competencies in online education. E-learning is a competitive educational tool but teachers and students should be aware of its pros and cons and, if possible, overcome them.

In the modern world, it is necessary to transform the existing models of religious education through Islamic education since cases when graduates of religious educational institutions completely abandoned religious practice indicate its inefficiency. This is due to the crisis of secular values experienced by the former Soviet republics generated by the separation from the spiritual and cultural values of past generations.

According to Z. Sardar and J. Henzell-Thomas, the feature distinguishing secular education from Islamic is that the German tradition sees the purpose of higher education in the advancement of science. The French model prioritizes the promotion of the knowledge and competence needed by the nation. The British tradition emphasizes the development of the student's personality and competence ([Sardar, Henzell-Thomas, 2019](#)). The Islamic model differs in the goals pursued and the functions performed. The purpose of religious education is to form a perfect personality (al-insan al-kamil), i.e. upbringing through education rather than a formal interpretation of knowledge and information. The key factor in this process influencing the formation of a versatile personality is religious practice as a method of consolidating the information received.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, religious education had to adapt to new conditions, which became a problem for many Islamic educational institutions. Islamic online education turned into a new tool having its advantages and merits. The pandemic also provided Madrasah colleges with an opportunity to rethink their approach to Islamic spiritual and cultural education. The transition to distance learning helped them experiment with new teaching methods and develop new ways to interact with students.

The passed stage of restrictions and distance Islamic education confirmed the effectiveness of traditional methods. In the pre-pandemic period, the management of Madrasah colleges prohibited students to use smartphones in the educational process. The traditional methodology of protecting students from excessive information in social networks and information portals needs to be revised psychologically and spiritually since the lack of a continuous information flow can negatively affect students after graduation. Graduates who are accustomed to constant protection from external stimuli to inculcate Islamic values and culture after entering the globalized world and secular society might experience cognitive dissonance and feel depressed. This entails the loss of moral and spiritual values adopted during the period of education. However, it is more effective to put an internal filter on external stimuli and destructive information and learn to focus on useful content,

communication through social networks, and modern information flows. This method allows for forming perfect personalities (al-insan al-kamil) with due regard to the realities of the globalized and information world.

This study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The study's primary focus on Madrasah colleges in Kazakhstan could constrain the generalizability of its findings to a broader context. The unique cultural and historical background of Kazakhstan may not be universally applicable to other regions or countries, making it important to exercise caution when extrapolating these findings beyond the study's specific setting. It is imperative for future research to encompass a more extensive geographical and cultural scope to better understand the broader implications of the study's conclusions in diverse contexts.

5. Conclusion

We conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on spiritual and cultural education in Madrasah colleges in Kazakhstan. The trends that have emerged in spiritual and cultural education, such as a greater focus on online education and critical thinking, are shaping the future of Madrasah college education. We observe a change in goals toward the creation of a competent graduate. Accordingly, it is necessary to consider the difference between the formation of spiritual and cultural values and competence in the modern globalizing world.

Online learning contributes to the safety of students and teachers, saves time and costs, provides accessibility for a wide range of students, and ensures flexibility and mobility in the educational process. However, new forms of education do not fulfill all goals of this process, which is confirmed by the results of the study. Islamic e-learning is a competitive tool that continues to develop in the future. To use online learning in Islamic education more effectively, teachers and students should be aware of its pros and cons and, if possible, overcome them and find new methods for solving problems.

The Islamic philosophy of education contributes to the formation of culture and understanding of historical religious values by young people. These are as follows: the need to develop strategies to mitigate the problems of online distance learning, such as the quality of infrastructure, widespread access to information technology, and the expansion of opportunities for social interaction between students and teachers of the new generation.

The educational and social changes that affect the spiritual and cultural education of Kazakh students in Madrasah colleges require a more detailed and in-depth study.

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