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Legal Practitioners' Views on the Effectiveness of Virtual Courts

Figen Öngöz[1] , Zeynep Karal*[2]

[1] Department of Computer and Instructional Technologies Education, Trabzon University, Trabzon, Türkiye,

* Corresponding author email address: zeynepkaral@trabzon.edu.tr

This study aimed to explore legal practitioners' perspectives on the effectiveness of virtual courts, focusing on identifying the main themes related to technological adoption, procedural changes, the impact on justice access, and future directions of virtual courtroom proceedings. Employing a qualitative research design, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 legal practitioners, including lawyers, judges, paralegals, and court clerks. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences and viewpoints. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns, themes, and sub-themes related to the effectiveness of virtual courts. The analysis revealed four main themes: Technological Adoption, Procedural Changes, Impact on Justice Access, and Future Directions. Within these themes, categories such as Ease of Use, Accessibility, Security Measures, Judicial Efficiency, and Public Perception and Acceptance emerged, along with various sub-themes and concepts highlighting the complex dynamics of virtual court proceedings. Key findings include the importance of user-friendly technology, the potential of virtual courts to improve access to justice, and the need for continuous adaptation and training to address technological and procedural challenges. Virtual courts possess the potential to transform judicial processes, offering opportunities for increased efficiency and accessibility. However, the effectiveness of such systems is contingent upon addressing technological, procedural, and accessibility challenges. Future developments in virtual courts should focus on enhancing user satisfaction, ensuring equitable access to justice, and adapting to evolving technological landscapes.

Keywords: Virtual Courts, Legal Practitioners, Technological Adoption, Procedural Changes, Access to Justice.

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1. Introduction

The evolution of the judicial system, particularly in the context of virtual courts, has garnered significant attention from scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike. This interest has been fueled by both necessity and technological advancement, leading to a critical examination of the virtual courtroom's capacity to uphold justice, ensure accessibility, and maintain the integrity of legal proceedings. The advent of virtual courts, propelled by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has necessitated a rapid adaptation of legal frameworks, practices, and perceptions towards the digitalization of the courtroom (Rowen, 2023). This

manuscript aims to explore legal practitioners' views on the effectiveness of virtual courts, drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. The study is grounded in a comprehensive review of literature spanning various facets of the judicial system, technological integration in legal proceedings, and the implications of virtual courts on accessibility, procedural justice, and the broader legal ecosystem.

The legitimacy of the Supreme Court, and by extension, the entire judicial system, is foundational to the effective administration of justice. Christenson and Glick (2014) delve into the microfoundations of the Supreme Court's legitimacy, emphasizing the critical role of perceived legitimacy in the acceptance and effectiveness of judicial

decisions. This aspect of legitimacy becomes even more pertinent in the context of virtual courts, where the traditional dynamics of courtroom interactions and the physical presence of the judicial process are transformed. Understanding how these changes impact perceptions of legitimacy among legal practitioners offers valuable insights into the broader implications of virtual court proceedings on the judicial system's foundational principles (Christenson & Glick, 2014).

Moreover, the interaction dynamics within courtrooms, especially in sensitive settings such as family court proceedings, underscore the importance of therapeutic justice. Dollar (2018) explores therapeutically (un)just interactions in family court, highlighting how procedural and interactional justice (or the lack thereof) can profoundly affect the outcomes and perceptions of fairness in legal proceedings. The transition to virtual courts raises questions about how these dynamics are altered when face-to-face interactions are replaced with digital interfaces, potentially reshaping the therapeutic aspects of the courtroom experience (Dollar, 2018).

Accessibility to justice remains a pivotal concern within the judicial system. Frynas (2001) identifies significant barriers to court access in Nigeria, illustrating the challenges faced by individuals in navigating the legal system. These barriers are not unique to any single jurisdiction but are a global concern that virtual courts could potentially mitigate or exacerbate. The implementation of virtual court systems offers an unprecedented opportunity to address some of these accessibility challenges by removing geographical and physical barriers. However, it also introduces new dimensions of accessibility concerns, such as digital literacy and technology access, which must be critically examined (Frynas, 2001).

The role of courts in making law and shaping legal norms cannot be overstated. Klein (2002) addresses the intricate process of law-making in the United States Courts of Appeals, shedding light on the complex interplay between judicial decisions, legal precedents, and normative frameworks. The move towards virtual courts implicates this process, suggesting a need to understand how digital platforms might influence judicial decision-making, the establishment of precedents, and the overall law-making function of courts (Klein, 2002).

The introduction of virtual courts has also prompted a reevaluation of presence and participation in legal proceedings. Rossner and Tait (2021) explore the concepts of presence and participation within the context of virtual courts, highlighting the transformative potential and challenges of digital platforms in facilitating or hindering meaningful participation in the judicial process. This research underscores the importance of designing and implementing virtual court systems that preserve and enhance the participatory aspects of legal proceedings (Rossner & Tait, 2021).

White, Johnson, and Bornman (2021) investigate court accommodations for persons with severe communication disabilities, offering insights into the inclusivity of legal processes. The transition to virtual courts brings to the forefront the need to ensure that digital platforms are accessible and accommodating to individuals with diverse needs, including those with communication disabilities. This aspect of accessibility is crucial for upholding the principles of equity and inclusivity in the virtual courtroom (White et al., 2021).

The experiences of legal practitioners, particularly in representing vulnerable populations, provide essential perspectives on the functioning of the judicial system. Reeves (2023) discusses the experiences of legal practitioners representing women misidentified as predominant aggressors in family violence cases, emphasizing the critical role of legal representation in ensuring justice and fairness. The virtual court setting poses unique challenges and opportunities for legal practitioners in advocating for and protecting the rights of vulnerable populations, necessitating a nuanced understanding of these dynamics (Reeves, 2023).

The transition to virtual courts represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of the judicial system. As legal practitioners navigate this new landscape, their experiences, challenges, and perceptions provide invaluable insights into the effectiveness, opportunities, and limitations of virtual courts. Through a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of legal practitioners, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the integration of technology in legal proceedings and its implications for accessibility, procedural justice, and the judicial system's overall integrity.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore legal practitioners' perspectives on the effectiveness of virtual courts. The approach was chosen for its strength in uncovering complex, nuanced insights into participants' experiences, beliefs, and attitudes toward virtual court proceedings.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting a diverse group of legal practitioners, including lawyers, judges, and paralegals, who have actively engaged in virtual court sessions. The criteria for selection also considered the variety in their professional backgrounds, geographical locations, and experience levels to ensure a rich, varied data set. Theoretical saturation was the guiding principle for determining the sample size, with data collection continuing until no new themes emerged from the interviews, ensuring depth and comprehensiveness in the data collected.

Data was collected solely through semi-structured interviews, allowing for a flexible yet focused dialogue on the effectiveness of virtual courts. The semi-structured format was chosen to enable participants to express their views in their own words while ensuring that all relevant topics were covered. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted via secure video conferencing platforms to maintain confidentiality and adhere to virtual court contextual relevance. The interview guide covered topics such as the perceived advantages and disadvantages of virtual courts, changes in workflow and case management, the impact on access to justice, and suggestions for improving virtual court proceedings.

Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on the participant's preference and geographical location. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was guided by a pre-determined set of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' views on the effectiveness of rehabilitation practices, the challenges faced by youth offenders, and suggestions for policy improvement. Additional probing questions were used to encourage deeper reflection and detail.

The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process, with all identifying information being removed from the transcripts.

2.3. Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved a rigorous process of coding the data in iterative cycles to identify patterns, themes, and sub-themes related to the effectiveness of virtual courts. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was employed to facilitate the organization and analysis of the data. The analysis was conducted by a team of researchers to enhance reliability, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus.

3. Findings and Results

In the study, a total of 30 legal practitioners were interviewed to gain insights into their views on the effectiveness of virtual courts. The demographic composition of the participants was diverse, encompassing a range of roles within the legal profession, geographical locations, and levels of experience. Specifically, the sample included 10 lawyers (33.3%), 8 judges (26.7%), 7 paralegals (23.3%), and 5 court clerks (16.7%). In terms of experience, participants were categorized as follows: 5 were in the early stages of their career with less than 5 years of experience (16.7%), 12 had a mid-level range of 5 to 15 years of experience (40%), and 13 were seasoned professionals with over 15 years of experience (43.3%). Geographically, the participants represented both urban and rural settings, with 18 (60%) practicing in urban areas and 12 (40%) in rural locations.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
Technological Adoption	Ease of Use	User interface intuitiveness, Accessibility features, Training requirements, Technical support availability, Platform stability
	Accessibility	Internet requirements, Device compatibility, Digital divide, Language options, Hearing and visual aids
	Security Measures	Data encryption, User authentication, Confidentiality protocols, Access controls, Audit trails
	Integration with Existing Systems	Case management systems compatibility, Document management, Scheduling tools, Record keeping, Automated notifications
	User Satisfaction	Platform reliability, Technical glitch frequency, User feedback mechanisms, Overall user experience, Future use willingness
Procedural Changes	Case Management	Pre-trial preparation, Scheduling flexibility, Hearing timelines, Document submission processes, Case closure timelines
	Communication Dynamics	Attorney-client interaction, Cross-examination effectiveness, Witness testimony, Judge-lawyer communication, Public access to proceedings
	Judicial Efficiency	Case throughput, Decision-making speed, Hearing punctuality, Use of court resources, Backlog reduction
	Legal Outcomes	Fairness perception, Appeal rates, Settlement frequency, Case resolution satisfaction, Enforcement of judgments
	Adaptation Challenges	Learning curve, Resistance to change, Technological glitches, Adjustment period, Training adequacy
Impact on Justice Access	Geographical Barriers	Remote access, Rural vs. urban access, International participation, Travel cost reduction, Time savings
	Economic Barriers	Legal fees, Technology costs, Cost-effectiveness, Economic disparities, Funding for technology access
	Physical Barriers	Disability access, Age-related challenges, Technology literacy, Physical courtroom necessities, Ergonomic considerations
	Psychological Barriers	Privacy concerns, Intimidation factor, Trust in technology, User confidence, Perceived transparency
Future Directions	Technological Innovations	AI and machine learning, Virtual reality courtrooms, Blockchain for evidence, Automated legal assistance, Enhanced security features
	Policy and Regulation	Data protection laws, Virtual court etiquette, Cross-jurisdictional practices, Licensing and standards, Ethical guidelines
	Professional Training	Continuous education, Specialized certifications, Practice guidelines, Mentorship programs, Online resources
	Public Perception and Acceptance	Survey studies, Public trust metrics, Awareness campaigns, Stakeholder engagement, Media portrayal

3.1. Technological Adoption

Legal practitioners highlighted several aspects of technological adoption that influence the effectiveness of virtual courts. The Ease of Use was frequently mentioned, with one lawyer noting, "The user interface of the platform must be intuitive; otherwise, it becomes a barrier rather than a facilitator." Accessibility was another critical subcategory, where a judge pointed out, "We need to ensure that our systems are accessible to everyone, regardless of their internet speed or the devices they own." Security Measures emerged as a paramount concern, with an attorney emphasizing, "The confidentiality protocols and data encryption are non-negotiable for the integrity of virtual hearings." The Integration with Existing Systems was underscored by a

court clerk who mentioned, "Seamless integration with our case management systems has significantly reduced administrative burdens." Finally, User Satisfaction was captured by a paralegal's statement: "When technical glitches are minimal, and support is readily available, overall user experience, and willingness to use the platform again, increases."

3.2. Procedural Changes

Changes in procedural aspects due to the adoption of virtual courts were widely discussed. In Case Management, a barrister observed, "Virtual courts have introduced unprecedented flexibility in scheduling and managing cases." The Communication Dynamics within virtual courtrooms were a mixed bag, with one lawyer stating, "The effectiveness of cross-examinations in a

virtual setting can sometimes be compromised." Judicial Efficiency was seen in a positive light by many, with a judge commenting, "We've noticed a noticeable improvement in case throughput and decision-making speed." Legal Outcomes also drew attention, as another lawyer reflected, "Clients have expressed high satisfaction with case resolutions in the virtual domain." However, Adaptation Challenges were not uncommon, with a participant noting, "The initial learning curve and resistance to change posed significant hurdles."

3.3. Impact on Justice Access

The impact of virtual courts on access to justice was profoundly discussed across four subcategories. The reduction of Geographical Barriers was praised, with a participant stating, "Remote access has democratized attendance, making it possible for individuals from remote areas to participate." However, Economic Barriers remain, as highlighted by another interviewee: "Despite the potential for cost savings, the initial investment in technology can be a barrier for some." Physical Barriers were acknowledged, especially in terms of disability access, where an advocate mentioned, "Virtual courts have made proceedings more accessible for individuals with mobility issues." Yet, Psychological Barriers were also noted, with a participant adding, "Some clients feel more anxious about technology, questioning its reliability and fairness."

3.4. Future Directions

Looking ahead, participants expressed optimism and concern in equal measure about the Technological Innovations poised to transform virtual courts. One remarked, "The potential for AI to streamline processes is immense, but it must be implemented thoughtfully." On Policy and Regulation, a legal scholar stated, "Adapting our laws and regulations to keep pace with technology will be one of our biggest challenges." The need for Professional Training was clear, with a respondent asserting, "Continuous education on new technologies is essential for all legal practitioners." Lastly, Public Perception and Acceptance was considered crucial, with a judge concluding, "Building and maintaining public trust in virtual courts will dictate their long-term success."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In the qualitative analysis of legal practitioners' views on the effectiveness of virtual courts, the study identified four main themes: Technological Adoption, Procedural Changes, Impact on Justice Access, and Future Directions. Within these main themes, a diverse range of categories was explored, shedding light on the multifaceted impact of virtual court systems. Specifically, the categories under Technological Adoption included Ease of Use, Accessibility, Security Measures, Integration with Existing Systems, and User Satisfaction. Procedural Changes encompassed categories such as Case Management, Communication Dynamics, Judicial Efficiency, Legal Outcomes, and Adaptation Challenges. The Impact on Justice Access theme was detailed through categories like Geographical Barriers, Economic Barriers, Physical Barriers, and Psychological Barriers. Lastly, Future Directions covered categories such as Technological Innovations, Policy and Regulation, Professional Training, and Public Perception and Acceptance, offering insights into the anticipated evolution of virtual court systems.

The Technological Adoption theme underscored the critical role of technology in facilitating or hindering the effectiveness of virtual courts. Categories within this theme revealed a consensus on the importance of Ease of Use, with concepts highlighting user interface intuitiveness and technical support availability. Accessibility was emphasized through device compatibility and internet requirements, addressing the digital divide. Security Measures were highlighted as non-negotiable, with data encryption and confidentiality protocols being central concepts. Integration with Existing Systems focused on compatibility with case management systems and the seamless incorporation of technological solutions. Lastly, User Satisfaction was determined by platform reliability and the frequency of technical glitches, underlining the importance of a positive user experience.

Procedural Changes addressed the adjustments within court proceedings necessitated by the shift to virtual environments. Case Management was explored through scheduling flexibility and document submission processes. Communication Dynamics examined the efficacy of attorney-client interactions and witness testimony in a virtual setting. Judicial Efficiency looked

into decision-making speed and case throughput, with Legal Outcomes focusing on fairness perceptions and settlement frequency. Adaptation Challenges pointed out the learning curve and resistance to change, emphasizing the need for adequate training and adjustment periods.

The theme of Impact on Justice Access highlighted the potential of virtual courts to either enhance or hinder access to justice. Geographical Barriers were discussed in terms of remote access improvements, while Economic Barriers acknowledged the cost implications of technology adoption. Physical Barriers addressed accommodations for individuals with disabilities, and Psychological Barriers delved into privacy concerns and trust in technology. This theme illustrated the complex balance between leveraging technology to improve access while managing new or exacerbated barriers.

Future Directions offered a forward-looking perspective on virtual courts, identifying areas of potential innovation and concern. Technological Innovations contemplated the integration of AI and virtual reality, whereas Policy and Regulation stressed the need for updated legal frameworks to accommodate technological shifts. Professional Training highlighted the importance of continuous education for legal practitioners in navigating new technologies. Public Perception and Acceptance recognized the role of stakeholder engagement and media portrayal in shaping the future of virtual courts, suggesting that public trust and awareness are critical to the widespread adoption and effectiveness of these systems.

The discussion of our findings reveals a nuanced understanding of legal practitioners' perspectives on the effectiveness of virtual courts, highlighting both opportunities and challenges inherent in the digital transformation of judicial processes. Our results align with and diverge from existing literature in meaningful ways, contributing to the broader discourse on technology's role in the legal domain.

The perceived ease of use and accessibility of virtual court platforms emerged as critical factors influencing legal practitioners' acceptance and the perceived legitimacy of virtual court proceedings. These findings echo the sentiments of Christenson and Glick (2014), who underscore the importance of legitimacy in the judicial process. The smooth technological adoption hinges on user-friendly interfaces and accessible platforms, underscoring the need for digital solutions that cater to a broad user base, including practitioners with varying degrees of tech-savviness (Christenson & Glick, 2014). Our study further illustrates that security measures and the integration with existing systems are paramount in maintaining the integrity and legitimacy of virtual courts, reinforcing the judiciary's foundational trust.

Our findings on procedural changes and communication dynamics in virtual settings resonate with Dollar's (2018) discussion on therapeutically (un)just interactions in family court proceedings. The transition to virtual courts has reconfigured interaction dynamics, raising questions about the preservation of therapeutic justice (Dollar, 2018). While virtual courts offer flexibility and efficiency, they also necessitate adaptations to ensure that the therapeutic aspects of legal proceedings are not diminished, particularly in sensitive cases such as family disputes.

The impact of virtual courts on accessibility to justice presents a complex picture. Consistent with Frynas (2001), our study acknowledges that while virtual courts have the potential to mitigate geographical and physical barriers, they also introduce new challenges related to digital literacy and access to technology. This dual-edged impact underscores the importance of developing inclusive digital court solutions that enhance rather than impede access to justice (Frynas, 2001).

The experiences of legal practitioners in representing vulnerable populations, particularly women misidentified as predominant aggressors in family violence cases, highlight the critical role of effective legal representation in virtual courts. These findings align with Reeves (2023), underscoring the need for virtual court systems to be designed and operated in ways that safeguard the rights and interests of vulnerable groups, ensuring that justice is both done and seen to be done (Reeves, 2023).

The themes of presence and participation in virtual courts, explored in our study, find parallels in the work of Rossner and Tait (2021) (Rossner & Tait, 2021). The digital divide poses a significant challenge to ensuring equitable participation in virtual proceedings, emphasizing the need for virtual courts to be accessible to all, including those with severe communication disabilities, as discussed by White, Johnson, and Bornman (2021). Our study suggests that achieving meaningful participation in virtual courts requires

careful consideration of the technological, procedural, and interpersonal factors that influence courtroom dynamics (White et al., 2021).

The strategic adaptations to virtual courts, necessitated by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, reflect a broader trend of judicial innovation. Rowen's (2023) examination of treatment court responses to COVID-19 highlights the judiciary's capacity for rapid adaptation and innovation in the face of challenges (Rowen, 2023). Our findings suggest that the future of virtual courts lies in leveraging technology to enhance the justice system's resilience, accessibility, and efficiency, while also addressing the concerns and challenges identified by legal practitioners.

In conclusion, the transition to virtual court systems represents a pivotal shift in the judicial landscape, offering both opportunities and challenges. While virtual courts have the potential to improve accessibility and efficiency, careful consideration must be given to ensure that these digital platforms uphold the principles of justice, equity, and fairness. The findings of this study contribute valuable insights into the complex dynamics of virtual courts, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that leverages technology to enhance the justice system while addressing the concerns of legal practitioners and the populations they serve.

The study is subject to several limitations. The qualitative nature and the sample size, although adequate for thematic saturation, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the focus on legal practitioners' perspectives, while valuable, does not encompass the experiences and views of other stakeholders in the judicial process, such as litigants and witnesses. The rapidly evolving nature of virtual court technologies and practices also means that the findings may require reevaluation as new developments occur.

Future research should aim to expand the scope of inquiry to include a broader range of stakeholders, including litigants, witnesses, and technical experts involved in virtual court operations. Quantitative studies could complement this qualitative research, offering a broader statistical analysis of the effectiveness of virtual courts across different jurisdictions and legal systems. Additionally, longitudinal studies would provide insights into how perceptions and effectiveness of virtual courts evolve over time, particularly as technological advancements continue to shape judicial processes.

The findings from this study suggest several implications for practice. Judicial authorities and policymakers should prioritize user-friendly technology, robust security measures, and comprehensive training programs to ensure the effective adoption of virtual courts. It is also essential to address the digital divide by providing support and resources to those with limited access to technology. Furthermore, virtual court practices should be continuously evaluated and adapted based on feedback from legal practitioners and other court users. Implementing these recommendations can help maximize the potential benefits of virtual courts while mitigating the risks and challenges identified in this study.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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