Isolation Among University Students During the COVID-19 Lockdown: The Mediating Impacts of Social Sites Usage and Pursuing Social Support

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Abstract

As a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, social isolation has become required globally. This period of social isolation can be a risk factor for mental health issues, particularly in younger adults. Young adults also use social media at a higher rate than other age groups, a type of socialising that has been associated to bad mental health outcomes like isolation and serious depression. During the COVID-19 outbreak, the current study looked at the possible mediating effects of social networking site usage and social support searches on the relationship between age and isolation signs and symptoms. The qualitative approach is utilised for this study. Data is acquired from ten university students from the United States and Pakistan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to learn more about the phenomenon of depressive symptoms, loneliness, coping methods, and changes in their daily lives as a result of the epidemic from the United States and Pakistan. During the epidemic, university students were even more lonely than older individuals, used more social media, and sought less social aid, according to the data. The findings are discussed in light of past research, as well as the potential impacts of fear and isolation during a pandemic from both countries.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, isolation, social media, social support.

1. Introduction

The coronavirus disease epidemic of 2019 (COVID-19) triggered a global health catastrophe, putting individuals in a distressing and unexpected scenario (Ciotti et al., 2020). Individual feelings, everyday habits, and relationships were all profoundly affected by the possibility of contamination and the experience of social alienation. Uncertainty about the pandemic's timeline exacerbated people's worries, stress, and bewilderment (Varma et al., 2021). According to (Kowal et al., 2020), both older and younger people experienced increased anxiety and feelings of isolation as a result of the quarantine. Researchers from all across the world have been examining how the pandemic has affected mental health since the early weeks of COVID-19's spread (Cullen et al., 2020) and caused people to plan how to deal with their isolation (Fluharty et al., 2021). Losing one's regular routine and having fewer social interactions can, in fact, cause boredom, frustration, and isolation. These emotions can cause people to feel very distressed and increase their risk of developing mental illnesses like depression. The subjective feeling of loneliness best captures people's negative feelings of a lack of meaningful social connections, both in terms of quantity and quality of social contacts (Tuijt et al., 2021). Despite the distinction between objective social isolation and subjective loneliness (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), social separation is undoubtedly one of the most potent predictors of loneliness and has negative effects on both health and well-being

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(Kanitz et al., 2014). In fact, social isolation brought on by disengagement from society exacerbates loneliness in individuals.

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures caused social isolation, which had a detrimental effect on the mental health of the general population worldwide. This increased mental distress, depression, and anxiety, which was occasionally linked to changes in feelings and lifestyle, like decreased physical activity, unhealthy eating habits, poor sleep quality, and a sense of loneliness (Luciano et al., 2021). Due to the uncertainty of their financial status, school closings, and the suspension of educational services, parents experienced psychological anguish (Mazza et al., 2021). Children and teenagers started to exhibit negative emotional reactions (stress, concern, helplessness, social and dangerous behavioural difficulties, anxiety, and depression) as well as changes in lifestyle (sleeping issues, more screen time, decreased physical activity, and poor eating habits).

On January 30, 2020, the WHO designated the COVID-19 outbreak as a public health emergency of global concern. In March 2020, the WHO started classifying it as a pandemic to emphasise the gravity of the situation and to compel all governments to take action in identifying cases and halting the spread of the disease (Mazza et al., 2021). The most potent and effective defence that society has against this virus, which impacts not only health but also economy, politics, and social order, is the prevention of its spread, despite the existence of cures for diseases and the tremendous advancements made by our civilization. The main strategies for halting the disease's spread in society include hand hygiene, social seclusion, and quarantine. Stronger quarantine regulations would help eliminate secondary cases by detecting more COVID-19 positive patients in the community and increasing testing capacity.

A comprehensive definition of social support, which will be used in the proposed dissertation: In both official (such as support groups) and informal (such as friendships) contexts, social support refers to the social resources available or really offered to a person by non-professionals (Frison & Eggermont, 2015). Emotional support (e.g., love, caring, understanding), informational assistance (e.g., answers to specific questions), and instrumental support (e.g., aid with daily duties, essential physical resources, transportation) are the three categories of social support identified by scholars (Burleson, 2003). One form of social support that has gotten a lot of press: purposefully seeking help from friends and family in times of stress (Helsen et al., 2000). The relevance of social support has been studied extensively. Social media refers to a collection of online social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. During the COVID-19 epidemic, social media is anticipated to grow even more in importance as a means of communication because people are unable to leave their houses for anything besides essentials and are prohibited from physically gathering. Prior to COVID-19, social media use among young adults was essentially widespread, with 90 % of them using it (Kumar et al., 2021). Researchers have begun to study the link between increased social media use and reductions in youth mental health in the last decade as a result of these occurrences (Sanchez et al., 2020). Researchers have concentrated on the effects of social media use on young adults' social support, loneliness, sense of well-being, and depression (Lisitsa et al., 2020). A study indicated that when teenagers sought social support and received perceived social support through Facebook, their melancholy mood improved; yet, when social support was not effectively obtained, adolescents' depressed mood worsened (Wadley, 2016). If this tendency continues true for young adults, their ability to find social support both online and off could create a self-reinforcing cycle.

2. Materials and methods

In older people, loneliness and social isolation are all too prevalent and typically coexist. Social isolation is based on the volume and frequency of social interactions, whereas loneliness is related to an individual's subjective feelings. Social isolation is defined as the objective state of a person's social surrounds and patterns of interaction, whereas loneliness is defined as the subjective feeling of being alone (Page, 2013). Page clarified that loneliness and social isolation are not the same thing; research has shown that both have detrimental effects on health through comparable but different pathways. The dependence on generic measures that only capture aggregate levels of help seeking is one of the limitations of the studies highlighted above. That is, much of the existing research on social support and support seeking has operationalized social support by asking participants about the size of their social network or how readily available they believe support resources are (Antonucci, 1986). A following study defines that the requesting assistance from one's partner is linked to enhanced closeness, relationship satisfaction, and lower

anxiety (Collins, Feeney, 2000). A daily diary method is frequently used in studies of daily pain and coping (Gunthert, Wenze, 2012). These studies are instructive, despite the fact that help seeking is only a small part of them. Social support as a part of coping with arthritis pain and discovered that higher levels of pain are linked to more emotional support seeking, implying that the perceived severity of a negative event is linked to the likelihood of seeking help (Smyth et al., 2014). Even before the general public had access to the Internet, computer-mediated communication had long been used to communicate social solidarity. This practise of using computer-mediated communication to exchange somewhat anonymous supportive messages persisted into the Internet age. Discussion forums known as "newsgroups" were developed in the early years of the Internet as a means of disseminating information and encouraging group conversations among scholars and system administrators (McKenna, Bargh, 1998). However, new study reveals that people's online and real social networks are becoming increasingly entwined. In terms of social support in particular, the Internet was once a revolutionary medium for providing assistance to certain groups (Romiszowski, Mason, 2013). However, with the increasing popularity of the Internet, the individuals one meets at work or in their town may also be the people with whom one communicates via e-mail and chat (Luppicini, 2007). The increased popularity of online social networking services is a crucial element in this evolution.

With the development of new web services that emphasised social contact, the Internet gained widespread acceptability as a facilitator of social connection (Keenan, Shiri, 2009). Platforms like *MySpace, Facebook, YouTube*, and *Twitter* became popular in the mid-2000s as a way to communicate with others in a number of mediums (video, audio, and text), as well as create new relationships and maintain old ones. As a result, fundamental changes in the way the Internet is used and its place in the social sphere began to emerge. High systolic blood pressure and an increased risk of heart disease are only two of the many physical and psychological effects of loneliness. Loneliness and social isolation have been associated to a higher risk of coronary artery disease-related death, even in middle-aged people without a history of myocardial infarction (Valtorta et al., 2016).

Additionally, research has shown that social isolation and loneliness are both independent risk factors for higher all-cause mortality (Plagg et al., 2020). Numerous detrimental consequences on one's mental health are caused by loneliness. Reduced sleep efficiency (by 7 %) and extended wake time following sleep onset have both been linked to loneliness (Christiansen et al., 2016). The loneliness, along with low self-reported health, decreased functional status, vision issues, and a perceived negative shift in one's quality of life, can all lead to an increase in depressive symptoms (Segrin, Passalacqua, 2010). According to a systematic analysis, loneliness has been associated to both attempted and successful suicide in older people, which is examined in the study by (Gomboc et al., 2022). Loneliness, like depressive symptoms, has been linked to a decline in cognition over time. In a thorough analysis, it was discovered that social isolation and loneliness were highly associated with incident dementia (Rafnsson et al., 2020). The physiological stress response, such as increased cortisol, is the hypothesised cause of loneliness's detrimental impacts on health. Abnormal stress reactions have detrimental effects on health. The mechanism for social isolation may be related to behavioural modifications, such as an unhealthy lifestyle (smoking, drinking alcohol, doing less exercise, eating poorly, and disobeying medical orders) (Pinto et al., 2021). A smaller social network and limited access to healthcare worsen these problems. We may be able to develop the most efficient treatments if we can identify and better comprehend these potential pathways.

Based on the theoretical presumptions and study findings, we hypothesised that people who experienced high degrees of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic were more likely to suffer anxiety and be dysfunctional active in social media use, perhaps as a coping mechanism. As a result, we looked at whether participants who felt particularly lonely during COVID-19's forced isolation were more likely to feel nervous and whether their loneliness resulted in overly-engaging in social media in an addictive manner. Additionally, the influence of excessive social media use on how loneliness and anxiety are experienced was examined.

RQ1. How university students affected with isolation in COVID-19 lockdown?
RQ2. What was the reasons of isolation for university students in both countries?
RQ3. What strategies university students used to cope with isolation in lockdown?

This is a descriptive, qualitative research study examining self-perceived stress in the late adolescent population during the COVID-19 pandemic, which will occur in 2021. During COVID-19, the researchers used a cross-sectional interview approach to examine the felt stress levels of

public and private university students from Pakistan and the United States, as well as uncover characteristics linked to perceived stress in late adolescence. Furthermore, the motives for using social media for social support throughout the quarantine period have been highlighted. Adolescents aged 18 to 24 were recruited using a non-probability, purposive sampling approach. The researcher contacted university student organisations on social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram to recruit participants. The following criteria were used to determine who was eligible to participate: Participants must be between the ages of 18 and 24, live in the United States or Pakistan, and have lived in states or counties that have implemented COVID-19-related safety measures. At the start of 2021, a sample size of 20 late teens took part in the study.

3. Discussion

The increased use of social media in young generation was observed because it was the hardest time of their life as they have never been in any pandemic so to live with it was a big deal for them (Lemenager et al., 2020). To cope up with the situation, the quarantine and social distancing was enforced (Shah et al., 2020). There was no direct contact between the people which raised the feeling of isolation, boredom, anxiety and depression. The use of social media was considered as a new channel to vent out all the problems caused by the isolation (Bonsaksen et al., 2021). During COVID-19 many Taiwanese people used a variety of information sources depending upon the gender, age, profession and level of concern towards the pandemic (Chu et al., 2020).

The more information was searched for Covid 19 rather than for academic courses because people were more concerned about the health than other aspect of life (Vokinger et al., 2020). One of the important fact came in consideration that young people relied more on internet for Covid information as compared to older people who used traditional media (Orben, 2020).

Social Media played a significant role in providing the information related to pandemic by inviting the health experts, psychologist, and psychiatrists through their platform to instruct and advise people how they can calm their selves in this situation and how they can fight it (Liu, 2021). The social media is used as a constructive strategy by the adolescents to deal with anxiety, depression and frustration caused by pandemic (Cauberghe et al). Those who were lacking direct contact with people used social media contact to fulfil their survival needs.

The other added advantage of isolation people took in quarantine is that they gained physical health. Due to lockdown, the gyms were closed down which limited the physical activity of the people (Inasaridze, 2021). But people used social media and started digital exercise which again gave people a platform to let go of their depression and staying healthy and fit. During lock down, social media provided young generation to create online identities and build social network hence gaining valuable social support. Social media was also used as a source self-expression where you get to share what's going inside your mind without fear of being known (Qin et al., 2022).

4. Results

This section explains the participants' personal perspectives on COVID-19 lockdown and isolation. The result section is divided into three parts. The first part will demonstrate the effects of COVID-19 lockdown. The qualitative data analysis revealed various themes, some of which were common throughout Pakistan, while others were specific to the United States. The findings based on the perceptions of participants from both nations are presented in the next section.

It was discovered that there were numerous reasons for Pakistani university students to utilise social media more frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as how they dealt with their isolation during this time.

a) *COVID-19 lockdown affected university students from USA and Pakistan*

The fundamental cause of the sensation of isolation is the government's severe lockdown in both countries. One of the most difficult phases of the participants' lives was transitioning from a conventional life pattern to a virtual existence. Students from both countries have stated that the closure of all public places, travel bans, transfer of physical classes to an online forum, closure of dance, singing, and acting schools, closure of all shopping establishments, no gym services, no night parties, and no visits to relatives have a negative impact on students from Pakistan and the United States.

The COVID-19 lockdown has impacted on the "Health Related Behaviour" of universities students from both countries. The COVID-19 epidemic and subsequent "Stay-at-Home" directives, according to some US respondents, have affected both their positive health behaviours (sleep and

physical exercise) and bad health behaviours (alcohol consumption, drug use, and tobacco use). The most typical justification for altering health behaviours during the epidemic was having more time available (negative and positive). Others claimed that this circumstance made it difficult to get fresh foods, that people ate more comfort food and sugary foods, and that people started nibbling out of boredom. Participants from Pakistan said that, in addition to posing major risks to people's physical health, COVID-19 also had a negative influence on people's social, psychological, and mental health because of lockdown, job loss, financial stress, and, most crucially, a shift in daily routine.

COVID-19 lockdown affected significantly of the "Public Transport System" in both countries. Respondents from the US said that because of the epidemic, transportation system was closed completely and students were unable to plan any trips along with friends and family. As, public transportation was severely impacted. People were unable to move around and travel, which seriously worried the populace. These circumstances lead to the feeling of isolation and loneliness. Different areas of the transportation industry were affected differently by COVID-19. In order to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure the safety of essential personnel during the emergency response, cities across Pakistan with higher risks had to impose severe restrictions on public transportation since the outbreak of the disease. It is estimated that forced bus operators to lose millions of dollars per day in fare revenue.

One of the serious challenge faced by all over the world is "Food Security Challenge". The US participants explained the serious concern that the abrupt rise in food costs was the result of the unique coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which impacted food systems and economies nationwide. Public health initiatives, such as instructions to stay at home, caused disturbances in the food system and the labour market, which raised hurdles to obtaining food.

Respondents from Pakistan described the difficulties Pakistan faced with regard to food security and the ensuing socioeconomic effects. The government had also implemented initiatives to stabilise the efficiency of Pakistan's agri-food systems. Due to limited resources, particularly in rural parts of Balochistan, Sindh, and KPK, many livelihood- and food security-related demands remain unmet despite enormous efforts.

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 virus, the government decided to "Closure of Educational Institutions" in all countries. In the US, COVID-19 compelled educational institutions to switch from face-to-face instruction to virtual instruction, which had an impact on institutional stakeholders as well as constituted a threat to all of humanity because all parties involved in education had to alter their routines. Numerous conversations with US students revealed that they were dealing with serious issues with their mental health, finances, technical skills, and academics. Students from the Pakistan argued that they faced many problems due to closure of educational institutions specially university and college students stated that there was no proper mode for online education. Lack of internet facilities in remote areas posed major problems to the online system which also caused distress among students and teachers.

The COVID 19 has impacted the "mental health" of the students in both countries. The primary barrier to academic success, according to US respondents, is mental health problems brought on by the pandemic. Participants admitted that the COVID-19 pandemic had made them feel more stressed, isolated and anxious. Students' motivation, focus, and social relations were impaired by mental illness, which are essential skills for success in higher education. Pakistani students claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered the situation and had an impact on all facets of life. They argued that both the direct effects of the virus and the secondary consequences of measures like lockdowns and the ensuing economic toll on the populace have had a particularly bad impact on their mental health. Stress, depression, and anxiety were among the effects of the pandemic.

During this pandemic the individuals faced "loss of jobs" as well. Participants from the US reported that the COVID-19 epidemic caused millions of individuals to lose their jobs or have their working hours cut, and that the COVID-19 issue caused enormous market disruption across the nation. Students who had part-time jobs in hotels, restaurants, and other businesses to pay for their studies were severely impacted. According to Pakistani respondents, the expansion of COVID-19 badly impacted employment circumstances in the nation and resulted in millions of people losing their jobs as a result of the enforcement of lockdowns. The pandemic also forced a large number of people who had been hired abroad to return, adding to the burden of unemployment.

b) The Outcomes to Cope Up with Isolation from the USA

Multiple causes led to isolation during COVID-19 lockdown, according to the participants from the United States. During COVID-19 lockdown, they engage in a variety of activities to break free from their isolation. They define a variety of topics, including:

An increase in "usage of social media" was observed as a result of the government's rigorous lockdown. In order to work from home, participants have become more reliant on social media. They explained how they began to use social media more frequently after the shutdown. They were using internet channels to communicate with their buddies. They've joined a variety of online communities to learn more about COVID-19. In addition, there has been a huge surge in freelancing. However, after considerable use of the digital platform, they began to miss their regular lives, which led to sadness.

During the interview, many participants stated that they spent a large amount of time "playing online games" to pass the time. They soon became frustrated with this activity after following this regimen for several weeks. This situation made them feel lonely and depressed all of the time. But they started to make videos of games and uploaded them on social sites to earn via this approach.

Some of the participants admitted to being a casual user of an "online dating" service. They were bored with being at home and tried to fill their time with other activities. For them, being in lockdown was like living in a prion, and it was the most painful time of their lives.

Participants from the United States enrolled in "various online courses" and attempted to make the most of the lockdown period. However, after finishing a couple of courses, they became exhausted and decided not to enrol in any more.

Gyms in the United States were closed due to the shutdown. Some students began to continue their workouts at home by joining an "online fitness group" so they could stay healthy at home. Due to lockdown, students started to adopt bad eating habits which leaded to health consequences. On the suggestions of medical experts, respondents decided to join online fitness group and workout actively from home with virtual group members. These daily workout habits lead to a good healthy lifestyle during lockdown.

c) The Outcomes to Cope Up with Isolation from Pakistan

During covid-19 feelings of isolation and depression strongly resided in the students. To overcome these feelings, the students involved themselves deliberately in different activities.

Under the theme of "High usage of TikTok application", the following section will define the outcomes from Pakistan. During the initial lockdown of COVID -19, students in Pakistan faced many problematic situations which forced them to stay within the boundaries of their homes, strict restrictions were implemented for the maintaining of the social distancing, to ensure the wellbeing of individuals and the society. According to respondents no other platform provided them with content which provided them relaxation as well as entertainment because the content available on the TikTok is funny, relatable and is presented in such a way that it gives a complete content for watching during lockdown.

The second theme is defining as "Increase usage of Netflix". The respondents said, that as they were bound in their homes, they engaged themselves extensively with Netflix, which eventually led them to binge watching. The amenity of sitting at one place and getting mitigation from virtual reality was more allaying to them. This easiness made them habitual of Netflix to extent that they avoided the physical presence of family member because they felt annoyed and bothered if they were asked to get involved in the physical activity

A "Non-serious attitude toward education" theme is identified in this section. The participants were of the view that online education during covid-19 was a big challenge for them. As the online education required them to have a computer/laptop, stable internet connection and electricity thus unavailability of any one element disturbed their online education. As per participants, there were many other reasons as well, like lack of digital readiness from their instructors, issue of concentration and attention issues during ongoing lectures. Along with that they also raised the concern that most of the higher education institutes didn't facilitated the students with the online education which eventually built the non-serious attitude in students towards the education.

The "Excessive usage of online games" was observed, as face to face communication was banned during lockdown, they found the platform of online gaming more connecting for them to their friends. They, together with their friends played games for hours to kill the boredom and very

less leisure activities were available due to being house bound. As per participants, there were other factors as well like anxiety, achievement of entertainment and escapism also led them towards online gaming.

During COVID-19 lockdown "Increasing trend of online shopping" made the respondent's life simple and easy to manage. They had the option of ordering online 24 hours without keeping in mind the closing time of the shop. They just had to surf the internet, find their desired product and to order it. This trend was seen comparatively more in male students as prior to lockdown they could have gone to stores and bought their essentials but during Covid 19 they were house bound and had to order online.

5. Conclusion

The impact of COVID-19 has provided unique insight into both countries' students' physical activity. COVID-19-related shutdowns and regulations appear to have been linked to changes in students' physical activity, as well as the barriers and facilitators that influenced these behaviours. The pandemic appears to have influenced health behaviours that influenced an individual's risk of physical and mental illness. Massive restrictions on public transportation in order to limit virus transmission made students feel isolated because they couldn't travel anywhere. Food shortages, the closure of all academic institutions, and the loss of part-time jobs all had an impact on the lives of students in both countries.

To deal with their feelings of isolation and seek social support, participants turned to online social media platforms. According to the findings, respondents used social media platforms effectively from the United States. They remained distant but stayed in touch with family and friends via social media sites. They began to use the work-from-home strategy to earn money during the pandemic. They enrolled in several online courses and continued to exercise at home to maintain their physical health. Pakistan's participants, on the other hand, used online social media platforms for entertainment. Their use of social media was solely for entertainment and to pass the time. They watched movies on Netflix and had a casual attitude toward online education. The results of this study revealed that seeking support in response to stress varies significantly by venue, with online media forums being particularly popular during the COVID-19 lockdown in both Pakistan and the United States.

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