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Research Paper

Digital media and student life in india during covid-19: cultural shifts, coping mechanisms, and communication patterns

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic affected education first, then it spread to social life, and cultural practices afterwards. College students in India were at the very bottom of the pile, as they had to cope with the struggle of academics, social life and cultural practices all at once. Conducted through digital media technology, the present research is about the ways of the students in Tamil Nadu who were in the pandemic times. The methods used for data collection included brainstorming sessions, interviews, digital diaries, and online discussion logs with college students.Major psychosocial and cultural experiences were fear psychosis, relationship deprivation, online dependence, ritual-less religiosity, gratitude and grief expressions, financial difficulties in online education, health hazards, and talent showcasing. The discovery indicates that digital media was a way for people to deal with the situation and also an avenue for creativity. However, it also exposed the risks of overuse, digital fatigue, and unequal access. The research emphasizes the double aspect of digital media in the development of resilience, identity, and culture, and technology's critical role in students' crisis experiences comes out loud and clear through the insights gained.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted but also changed the entire world. It has affected life, work, education, and social contacts in such a way that it can never be forgotten. India, with its large and diverse population, faced the same fate but the impact was felt in different areas [1]. The government imposed lockdowns all over the country, closed schools and colleges, cut down on travel, and enforced social distancing. These measures turned the lives of millions upside down, and routines and social structures were abruptly broken. College students had to go through unique problems that included the cancellation of classroom learning, reduction in extracurricular activities, and exclusion from cultural events that were important for their identity formation and psychosocial development.

The pandemic has brought about a drastic change in student life across India, of which one of the biggest was the rapid increase in digital engagement. In the context of the disruption, digital media was the lifeline and was, in fact, the only thing that the new normal perception was based upon. Video conferencing (Zoom, Google Meet), instant messaging (WhatsApp), social networking (Instagram, Facebook), video-sharing (YouTube, TikTok), and collaborative (Microsoft Teams, Slack) tools had to make a very quick shift from being the once leisure-oriented applications to becoming the very tools through which students could continue to learn, socialize, and express their creativity. Moreover, these apps aided and intensified students' cultural involvement as they could attend online festivals, watch religious rituals, share artistic performances, and take part in digital contests that brought people together socially and culturally amidst the lockdowns.

Nevertheless, beyond functional puposes, digital media also addressed students' psychological and emotional challenges. The abrupt isolation combined with the uncertainty about the academic progress, health risks, and future led to a lot of anxiety, fear, and emotional pain among the students. Through social media, online communities, and mental health apps, students were able to get support from their peers, to share their emotions and to receive information. They had virtual conversations with others, told each other their stories, and got professional help through online counseling, meditation apps, and stress management workshops. The students' engagement in digital activities not only helped them to cope but also built a community around them letting the students deal with the uncertainty together instead of being isolated.

The pandemic also forced changes in the cultural and spiritual practices, as the traditional rituals, festivals, and community gatherings were moved online.Digital media became a means of achieving "ritual-less religiosity," which means converting religious and spiritual practices into digital or non-traditional forms that still have faith and community meaning but without the physical rituals, allowing students to join live-streamed ceremonies, online prayers, and spiritual content via social platforms.

The research study focuses on the state of Tamil Nadu, as the location for studying how students turned to digital media during the pandemic, providing insights into digitally driven resilience, coping, and cultural adaptation patterns. The study also discusses the psychosocial pros of the digital engagement, such as stress reduction, social connection, and emotional support, together with the culturally adapted practices. It also mentions the disadvantages of highly digital-dependent lifestyles, such as health problems, digital fatigue, and educational inequalities.

By examining these aspects, the research sheds light on the complexity of digital platform usage by students in the crisis context. It positions their experiences in the context of the two theories, Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Richness Theory, thereby demonstrating how students select and use digital media according to their needs for information, social interaction, psychological support, and creativity, while pointing out the necessity of proper usage and institutional support as factors in the process.

2. RELATED WORK

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 led to major disruptions in education, social life, and cultural activities all over the world. Digital media, however, became a key resource for the students in coping,

learning, and maintaining social connections. The present literature review combines worldwide and Indian studies on the role of digital media during the times of crisis, a discussion that is focused on its advantages, limitations, and theoretical basis.

2.1 Digital Media as a Coping Mechanism

Global studies pinpointed digital media as the main coping tool in crises. A study done by [1] shows that the youth resorted to the web to keep the social connections alive, get information at the right time and minimize their fears during the pandemic. The use of digital forums, social networks and video chat tools gave the youth a way to share and maintain their feelings with each other thus preventing them from getting lonely [2]. Studies by [3], [4] point out that online communication had not only a distracting aspect, but it also helped developing resilience and mental stability during the lockdown period through a strengthening of the already existing social ties.

In India, where people usually rely on close relationships and large family circles, the banning of contact between family and friends led to serious psychological problems. The students lost the usual physical proximity to their friends, teachers, and family members and hence the support structures that they were used to [5]. The virtual platforms that were the only way of communicating helped the students to stay in touch through texts, calls, and online group activities [6]. These sites turned out the moments for expressing feelings, joking, and creating together which in turn helped to cope with the stress that the pandemic brought about [7], [8].

This not only directed the behavior but also diminished one's feeling of uncertainty which is one of the main reasons for anxiety during such situations [9]. Online mental-health applications, such as meditation guides, cognitive-behavioral therapy modules, and peer-support chatrooms, became valuable tools for emotional regulation. Research indicates that students who used these resources managed stress better, illustrating technology's role in fostering resilience.

2.2 Digital Media and Education

The educational system's sudden transition to online learning revealed the upside and downside of digital learning at the same time. According to the studies done by [10], [11] students' involvement and their academic performance were heavily dependent on the availability of reliable internet, digital devices, and online tools especially during this period. The students from less privileged families found it difficult to cope and thus were left behind due to their insufficient access to devices, poor internet connection, and lack of conducive learning environment, which in turn resulted in unequal educational outcomes [12].

The shift in teaching methods created more problems in addition to the above-mentioned ones. The teachers tried various methods such as recorded lectures, real-time video classes, interactive quizzes, and multimedia assignments. Despite these methods being quite liberating and somewhat personalized, the learners encountered issues such as cognitive overload, screen fatigue, and less interaction with teachers and fellow students. Hands-on practice in disciplines like laboratory sciences, arts, and performance-based courses was very much affected as such experiences could not be imitated online [13]. However, technology had its good side. Students were very much in favor of having the flexibility of pacing the learning, repeatedly watching recorded classes, and attending online seminars and workshops that were not limited geographically [14]. Studies suggest that the learners who interacted more with the digital resources showed better problem-solving skills, flexibility, and self-directed-learning capabilities which in turn was indicative of the quality of transformation that the online education during crises could bring about [15].

2.3 Social Connectivity and Cultural Practices

Digital media kept the social relations and the cultural engagement during the time of physical distancing. In the research done by [16] it is mentioned that virtual platforms allowed people to take part in family functions, religious rites, and cultural festivals, thus making the disruption of social and cultural life only partial. In Tamil Nadu, children were present at the online religious rituals, streamed lectures on

religion and took part in the digital carnivals and competitions of culture. This change, called "ritual-less religiosity," shows that with the help of technology, spiritual and cultural practices are able to transform without losing their symbolic or emotional importance.

Students were engaged in online study groups, discussion forums, and collaborative projects which not only provided academic collaboration but also emotional and social support [17], [18]. The digital media such as memes, short videos, and live streaming sessions were different from the past in that they had become culturally meaningful artifacts and at the same time were reinforcing the shared identity, humor, and collective experience. So, the informal learning and the cultural participation that the digital media was facilitating pointed out its dual role in promoting both the psychosocial well-being and the cultural continuity.

Additionally, the students took to the digital media for their creative expression. The likes of YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok were the digital media where the students could display their skills in playing music, making visual arts, writing, and even educational content creation. The students' engagement proved to be a very fruitful avenue for them personally and also paved the way for the establishing of new online communities based on common interests, thus exhibiting how digital media is able to promote the participatory culture and social cohesion [19].

2.4 Risks in Digital Media Use

In spite of the above benefits, extensive use of digital media brought several risks. The study by [20] explored that over-dependency on online tools during COVID-19 created the risks like fatigue, eye strain, disrupted sleep patterns, and decreased motivation among students. The study by although based on German youth, stated similar concerns related to excessive screen use and decreasing offline social interaction activities also apparent among many Indian students.

Similarly, the study identified the risks like anxiety, social withdrawal, and decreased emotional stability. The extensive use of social media uncovered students to distressing news, social comparison, and cyberbullying.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This research is directed by the two theories that interpret the students' engagement.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) states that users choose the media that meet their information, social and psychological needs. The students in Tamil Nadu displayed this kind of engagement by taking advantage of the digital platforms for various reasons: learning, socializing, and dealing with stress, spiritual engagement, and artistic expression.

Media Richness Theory (MRT) claims that the effectiveness of communication is correlated with the richness of the medium and its capacity to convey various signals, provide quick feedback, and enhance communication. The use of Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and video-based social media networks came very close to the situation of physical interaction, hence, these setups allowed more subtle communication and collaborative learning.

Ultimately, UGT and MRT provide a way of seeing how students not only used digital media to cope but also as cultural platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. METHODOLOGY

The survey conducted in this study involved 150 students from Tamil Nadu, India, with the purpose of investigating the use of digital media and its impacts during the pandemic of COVID-19.

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological method was applied in this study to delve into the students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodology of phenomenology facilitates a thoroughcomprehension of perceptions, feelings, and coping strategies within certain socio-cultural contexts.

3.2 Participants

The study included 150 undergraduate and postgraduate students from various colleges in Tamil Nadu. Through purposive sampling, the researcher was able to achieve the required diversity in terms of discipline, socio-economic status, and urban-rural background. The demographic profile of the participants is illustrated in Table 1 which shows their distribution by gender, age, and academic level.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Student Respondents (N = 150)

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	70	47
Female	80	53
Aged 18-21	90	60
Aged 22-25	60	40
Undergraduate	95	63
Postgraduate	55	37

The demographic profile reveals a mixture of ages and different academic qualifications, which is one of the factors that have contributed to the credibility and wider application of the results of the study.

3.3 Data Collection

The data were collected through a brainstorming session held in November 2021, which opened up discussions on education-related problems, social isolation, emotional difficulties, cultural changes, and ways of coping. This was complemented with 20 semi-structured interviews that gave a fuller understanding of the individual experiences and reflective narratives, plus 30 digital diaries and online discussion logs.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied through iterative coding to highlight the arising themes. The themes were divided into psychosocial and cultural factors such as fear psychosis, relationship deprivation, online dependency, ritual-less religiosity, expressions of gratitude, grief, financial strain, health hazards, and talent showcasing. Validation and reliability were increased through triangulation of different data sources.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

The investigation into students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic brought out the different impacts of digital media on academic, social, emotional, and cultural areas. The data gave rise to nine principal themes that reflected the positive and negative sides of digital engagement. The nine themes together with the main insights are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Themes and Observations from Student Experiences

Theme	Key Issue	Observation
Fear Psychosis	Anxiety about COVID-19, academic uncertainty	Monitoring news, using mental health apps, peer support groups
Relationship Deprivation	Emotional distress from social isolation	Video calls, online gatherings, WhatsApp/Instagram chats
Online Dependency	Excessive screen time, neglect of offline life	Entertainment, Gaming, streaming, reduced academic focus
Ritual-less Religion	Adaptation of spiritual practices online	Livestreamed rituals, online prayer sessions

Gratitude to Frontliners	Civic engagement via digital platforms	Social media campaigns honoring health workers
Grief and Helplessness	Emotional toll of loss and financial strain	Online counseling, peer support (partial relief)
Costlier Online Education	Financial burden & reduced engagement	Connectivity costs, limited activities, missed mentorship
Health Hazards	Physical & psychological effects of screen exposure	Eye strain, headaches, musculoskeletal discomfort
Showcasing Talents	Opportunities for creativity & skill display	Artistic, entertainment, and educational content

In Table 2, the student experiences are depicted from the difficulties of fear and health risks through to the talent and digital engagement as positive outcomes that revealed the dual role of digital media as a coping tool and cultural transformer. The frequency of each theme is shown in Figure 1 with the percentages indicating the response of the participants in the surveys and interviews.

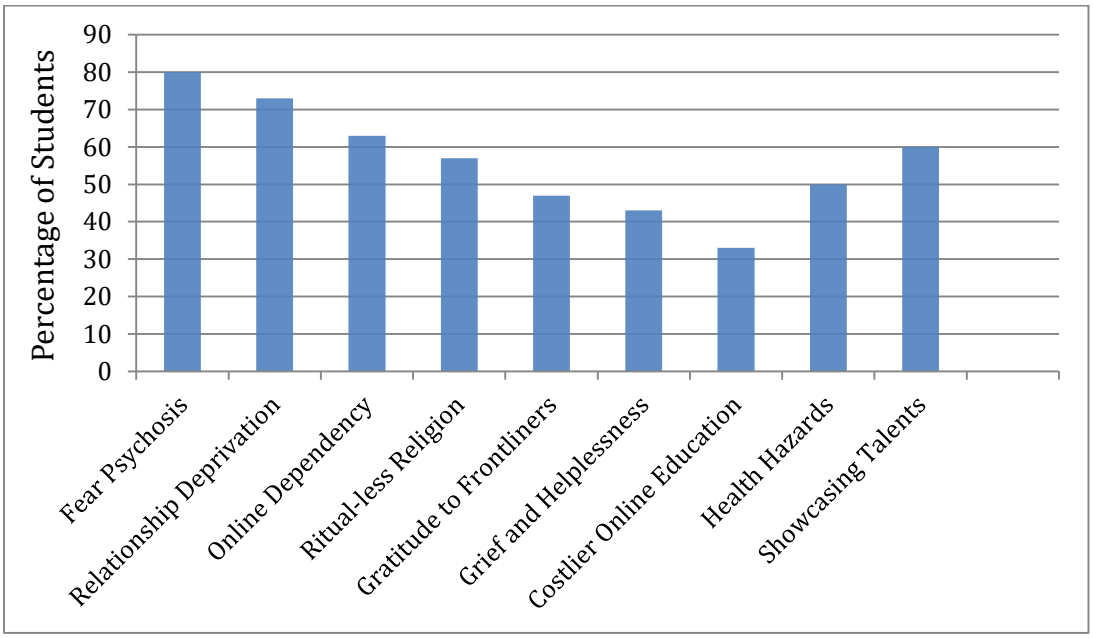


Figure 1. Prevalence of Themes Reported by Students During COVID-19

Moreover, students went on to mention the qualitative themes that they had experienced and claimed to have significantly increased the use of the digital media during the lockdown period. The summary of usage of the digital media before and during the pandemic by Table 3 is a clear indication of the increased online engagement across various domains of activity.

Table 3. Frequency of Digital Media Usage before and During COVID-19 (N = 150)

Media Type	**Before Covid-19 (Hrs/Day)**	**During Covid-19 (Hrs/Day)**	**% Increase**
Social Media	2.0	4.0	+100%
Online Classes	0.3	5.0	+1567%
Streaming/ Entertainment	1.4	3.0	+114%
News Consumption	0.8	1.5	+88%

Table 3 reveals that there was a significant upsurge in pupils' participation, mainly in virtual lessons where the most notable uplift was recorded. This quantitative deduction is in line with the

qualitative aspects of Table 2 showing that the use of digital media in fact during the pandemic was an important factor in coping, learning, and maintain ing social interaction.

In order to illustrate the interconnections among students' experiences, Figure 2 characterizes the different coping mechanisms they used to combat the difficulties caused by the pandemic, consisting of nine interrelated coping themes, fear psychosis, mourning, ritual-less religion, and talent showcasing, and the academic, emotional, and cultural dimensions are revealed to be inseparably connected.

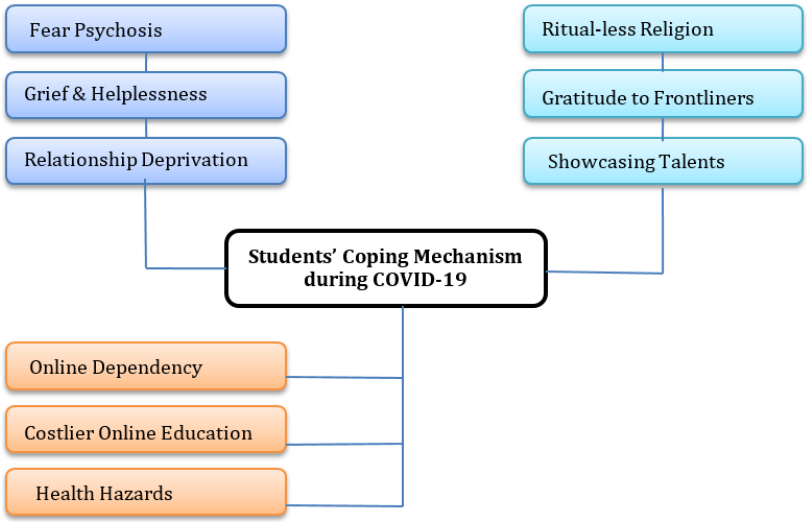


Figure 2. Thematic Map of Students' Coping Mechanisms During COVID-19

The following subsections analyze thoroughly each of the nine emerging themes, connecting qualitative experiences with quantitative patterns of media usage, and thus giving a holistic view of students' digital engagement through COVID-19.

4.2 Fear Psychosis

The students experienced widespread anxiety due to the pandemic, ranging from fears of getting sick with COVID-19 to academic doubts and worries about their relatives' health. Most of them followed news and government warnings closely. The digital medium alleviated fear by offering timely and trustworthy information through official portals and real-time apps. Online mental health resources including tele-counseling, virtual therapy, and mindfulness apps helped students to cope with stress and anxiety. WhatsApp-hosted peer support groups were available for students to exchange coping techniques and personal experiences which effectively lessened feelings of being alone.

4.3 Relationship Deprivation

The lockdown measures disrupted daily face-to-face interactions with family, friends, and colleagues, which in turn caused psychological distress and the experience of loneliness, alienation, and even mild depressive symptoms. Digital means of communication helped to relieve the psychological effects of isolation through the increased usage of video conferencing apps, social media sites, and online gaming communities. Video calls, online get-togethers, and social media kept students socially connected.

4.4 Online Dependency

Initially, the digital platforms that came to people's rescue in terms of social deprivation eventually became the cause of people's over-reliance on them. The offline world was disregarded due to increased screen time that was spent on entertaining, gaming, and social networking activities. Emotional draining, lack of focus, and disrupted schedules were all felt by the participants as symptoms. The results underscore the ambivalence of digital media, as they were simultaneously a source of coping and connection, and a potential stressor in the case of overuse or addiction.

4.5 Ritual-Less Religion

Students, deprived of religious gatherings and traditional ceremonies, were forced to find ways to do their spiritual practices digitally. In huge numbers, online prayer meetings, motivation videos, livestreamed temple rituals, and taking part in virtual religious communities were the main activities when the lockdowns were enforced. Although digital religiosity was not as immersive as the physical one, it still provided comfort. The act of sharing religious content online helped community building and spiritual resilience, thus proving that cultural practices adapted to technological means.

4.6 Gratitude to Frontliners

The situation made students engage in social activities more than before, especially showing gratefulness towards health workers, sanitation staff, and police. Social media opened up a space where students recognized the workers in hospitals and other places by posting messages, making videos, and running digital campaigns. These social activities contributed to the reinforcement of social responsibility and collective solidarity, uniting personal pandemic experiences with larger civic actions. The use of digital media for prosocial purposes points out its role in developing empathy, community involved, and cultural change facilitation.

4.7 Grief and Helplessness

Economic difficulties, loss of relatives, and uncertainty regarding examinations and grading led to situations where students and others could only feel sad and helpless. The use of digital media lessened the emotional burden to some extent through peer-support groups, online forums, and counseling services, but these alternative methods could not fully match the impact of the emotional distress. Participants pointed out that sharing loss on social media gave understanding and temporary relief but the problems in the system were still there. The results indicate the restrictions of digital operations in meeting the psychosocial needs of individuals.

4.8 Costlier Online Education

The sudden transition to e-learning brought both financial and teaching challenges. Families had to pay for high-speed internet, devices for each family member, and software subscriptions, with the costs reflecting the higher use of digital platforms for educational purposes. Students from low-income families could not get stable internet connections that hindered their learning. Less practical work, no mentorship, and less communication in learning were among the disadvantages reported, which brought the problem of technology, the teaching method, and social inequality together.

4.9 Health Hazards

Prolonged screen exposure and sedentary lifestyle resulted in physical and psychological health issues. The students suffered from eye tiredness, headache, pain in the muscles and joints, and fast sleep disruption along with digital fatigue, which was the result of the increasing media use over the day. The results serve as a reminder of the paradoxical character of digital media, which provides people with the means to communicate and at the same time poses health risks, and thus the structured engagement with digital media becomes all the more important.

4.10 Showcasing Talents

Notwithstanding the difficulties endured in the process, the use of digital platforms turned out to be a very rewarding way of obtaining creative, skillful, and self-expressive experiences. There was a great increase in students' usage of social media, video-sharing platforms, and online communities for artistic talent, educational content, and collaborative project display, with engagement being the remarkable aspect that grew during the lockdown. Engagement in such activities led to the development of self-confidence, peer acknowledgement, and personal growth.

The nine themes collectively point out the complex interactions between students and digital media during the pandemic, illustrating not only the possibilities of developing resilience but also the specific risks to the mental health of the users.

The outcomes that have been discussed above indicate that the use of digital media was a major component of students' lives during the pandemic from different angles, thus yielding both positive and negative consequences. The nine themes illustrate the very real feelings that people went through such as fear, loss, and health risks, but also cultural adaptation and creative expression. The discussion that follows interprets these events against the theoretical and empirical background of the study. Theoretically, Figure 3 shows the two-sided nature of digital media in student life, that is, a helper, a culture shapeshifter, a risk creator all these while dovetailing the main arguments and empirical observations.

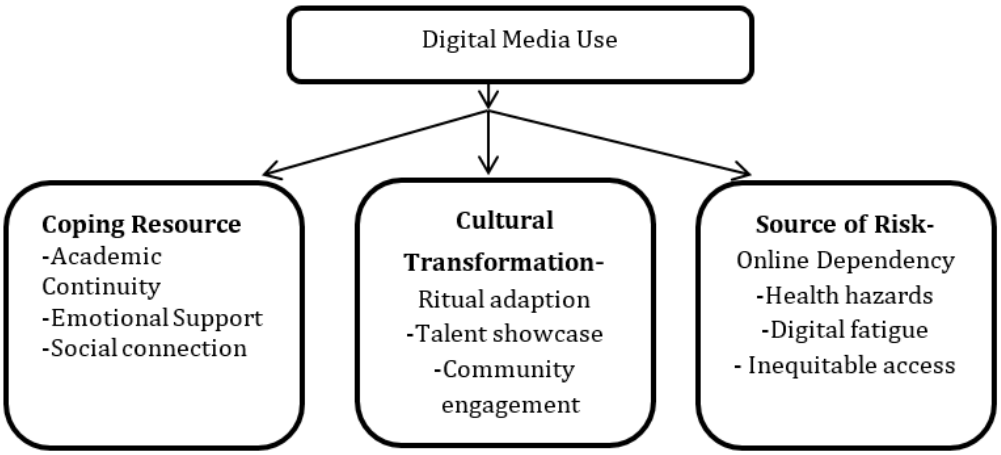


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework of Digital Media's Dual Role in Student Life during COVID-19

4.11 Digital Media as a Coping Resource

Digital platforms were the main facilitators in lessening the pandemic-caused stress and anxiety. The students made it a point to utilize online resources for the purpose of keeping friends, getting academic content, and handling emotional problems. This is in line with the UGT principles that state the users of media make a conscious selection of platforms to get their specific needs in the areas of information, socialization, and psychological relief satisfied.

Zoom and Google Meet, as video conferencing tools, made it easy for students to go to their classes, be a part of study groups, and have discussions with other students and teachers that were very interactive. Furthermore, mental health apps, online therapy, and mindfulness resources were available to help manage stress. These findings support the international studies that underscore the importance of technology in preserving mental and social health during lockdown periods [1], [3].

Founded on reliable health info, governmental warnings, and peers' shared knowledge, students were able to ride the wave of the crisis with utmost confidence. This digital media role has thus amplified its position as a very necessary and also a very comforting resource in the course of such long disruptions.

4.12 Digital Media as a Cultural Transformer

According to the findings of the study, the capability of digital media to be an artistically and culturally adaptive medium was one of the main elements that led to the change of students during the lockdown. The phenomenon of "ritual-less religiosity", which was seen in Tamil Nadu, is one of the best examples that show how students went virtual for their religious activities and were still able to maintain the bond and emotional involvement even though they were not present physically [16].

Another key factor in keeping students engaged through digital media was the support given for the enhancement of creativity. Students took advantage of video sharing, social media, and collaboration tools to showcase their artistic skills, create educational content, and join online competitions. Thus, in

the pandemic period, digital media turned out to be a cultural mediator because it enabled students to sustain and even enhance their social, educational, and cultural practices.

Besides, participation in civic and prosocial projects, such as the use of social media campaigns to show appreciation to the frontline workers, strengthened the community ties. This showcases the ability of digital media to facilitate collective actions, social responsibility, and moral engagement, thus pointing out its multifaceted cultural presence in times of crisis.

4.13 Digital Media as a Source of Risk

An extensive dependence on digital media, even though it has its advantages, also gave rise to several risks. Among students, the research pointed out that the use of digital media for entertainment, gaming and social networking purposes led to some negative results like physical discomfort, disturbed sleep, mental fatigue, and sometimes even social withdrawal. While richer media, those that can convey different cues and also allow for instant feedback, like video calls, can bring people together close to meeting face-to-face and thus mitigate isolation, they will nonetheless not be able to offer the same psychosocial advantages as being together physically. The students involved in the research were using high-richness platforms but still feeling emotional stress, experiencing isolation, and suffering from cognitive overload. Moreover, the move to online learning during the pandemic has brought to the forefront the widening gap between the rich and the poor in terms of education. The students who came from poor families were the ones that mainly needed the help with accessing computers, having reliable internet connection, and even proper school at home setup, thus showing that the digital means of education might be unintentionally promoting the existing inequalities in the social system. Thus, although digital media kept students socially connected, it created new forms of vulnerability.

5. CONCLUSION

In India, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a redefinition of the student life experience, exposing digital media as a central space for learning, communication, coping, and cultural expression. The present study reveals that for the college students in Tamil Nadu, digital media functioned not merely as a substitute but as a powerful tool through which they were able to maintain academic continuity, social interaction, stress relief, and the space for creative expression. Moreover, as students navigated the challenges of the pandemic, they were able to sustain academic engagement, social connections, and emotional wellbeing through the effective use of digital platforms that fostered their resilience, adaptability, and innovation. The findings also highlight the dual nature of digital media. While it helped students to stay connected and continue their academic engagements and cultural practices, excessive dependency has led to fatigue, health problems, emotional stress, and unequal learning experiences.

These experiences reflect the principles of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Richness Theory, highlighting both the strengths and limits of digitally mediated communication during the pandemic crisis. In summary, the pandemic has altered the way students use digital platforms in their daily lives, emphasizing the need for balanced engagement, equitable access, and support for wellbeing. Thus, digital media, when responsibly used, can help students to nurture their resilience, cultural continuity, and wholistic development.

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Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Innasimuthu Sebastian	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

C : **C**onceptualization
M : **M**ethodology
So : **So**ftware
Va : **Va**lidation
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis
I : **I**nvestigation
R : **R**esources
D : **D**ata Curation
O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft
E : Writing - Review & **E**diting
Vi : **Vi**sualization
Su : **Su**pervision
P : **P**roject administration
Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Informed Consent

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their voluntary consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained, and all participants provided informed consent.

Data Availability

The data that support this study were derived from case studies conducted in India. Further information may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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