Changing Trends of Social Interaction during the Pandemic and Its Effects on Mental Health – A Student’s Perspective

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Author’s contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Our survey explores the changing trends in social interaction and its effects on mental health amongst GCSE and A-level students during lockdown as it is the crucial years of education, shaping their future. This survey was carried out using Google forms. Results have been auto analysed with anonymity. A clear demonstration of anxiety, fear of failure, lack of motivation and loneliness has been noted. Emphasis on the importance of face-to-face interaction and the usage of digital platforms has been evident. Incorporation of mental health professionals in the educational system is vital in moving forward.

Keywords: Lockdown; COVID; mental health; student.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health awareness has dramatically risen over the past few years, especially among students as pressures to do well academically are common causes of mental health problems such as anxiety [1]. Face-to-face interaction is an integral part of their social development during formative years, which may be affected leading to mental health problems [1,2] during this pandemic. Lockdown has proven to prevent the spread of the virus itself, on the contrary it may have bred a surge of chronic mental health problems in younger generations, which was
explored in this survey. Concerns regarding 'lockdown loneliness' have been raised due to lack of human interaction among children which may have a long-term impact on their mental health [2]. Although, social media platforms may have temporarily mitigated the damaging consequences, it is not a replacement for face-to-face interaction in the post-COVID era [2].

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The survey was designed on Google Forms consisting 13 questions (Fig. 1) exploring the use of social media, the use of educational resources, face-to-face interaction, feeling of loneliness, the level of motivation and the fear of failure pre-COVID and during Lockdown [3]. The participants in this survey were students in Year 10, Year 11 and in Sixth Form from different schools in the East Midlands region, United Kingdom. The age range was between 14-18 years. The 33 responses received were anonymous and the results were analysed automatically by Google Forms [3].

3. DATA RESULTS

Before Lockdown 30.3% were using social media for over 2 hours a day. Since the lockdown the percentage increased to 66.7%. Pre lockdown 33.3% were using social media for an hour a day whereas during lockdown, the hours spent significantly increased. Observations revealed there was an increased percentage of students who used social media once lockdown was imposed (Figs. 1.1 & 1.2). Hence, there has been widening of the segment representing those who used social media for two or more hours; whilst constricting the segments of users who used social media for a shorter period of time.

Survey Questions
1. How often were you using social media before lockdown?
   - Not at all
   - 10-15 minutes a day
   - 1 hour a day
   - 2 hours a day
   - More than 2 hours a day
2. How often do you use social media now (during Lockdown)?
   - Not at all
   - 10-15 minutes a day
   - 1 hour a day
   - 2 hours a day
   - More than 2 hours a day
3. How often did you use educational online resources before lockdown was imposed?
   - Never
   - 1-2 times a week
   - 3-4 times a week
   - Every day
   - Never
4. How often do you use educational online resources now?
   - Never
   - 1-2 times a week
   - 3-4 times a week
   - Every day
   - Never
5. How many times in a week did you have face-to-face interaction with people outside your household before lockdown on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 - "none" and 5 - "all the time")
6. How many times in a week do you have face-to-face interaction with people outside your household during lockdown on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 - "none" and 5 - "all the time")
7. Rate the extent of loneliness you felt before lockdown on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 - "not at all lonely" and 5 - "I have no one to talk to")
8. Rate the extent of loneliness you are currently feeling during lockdown on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 - "not at all lonely" and 5 - "I have no one to talk to")
9. Rate the level of motivation you felt before lockdown on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 - "demonstrated" and 5 - "very motivated")
10. Rate the level of motivation you are currently feeling during lockdown on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 - "demonstrated" and 5 - "very motivated")
11. To what extent did you feel a 'fear of failure' regarding exam results before exams were cancelled? (1 - "I was not worried at all" and 5 - "I was very worried")
12. To what extent do you feel a 'fear of failure' regarding exam results after exams were cancelled? (1 - "I am not worried at all" and 5 - "I am very worried")
13. Are there any comments you would like to make regarding this survey?

Fig. 1. Survey questionnaire
Fig. 1.1. Usage of social media before lockdown

Fig. 1.2. Usage of social media during lockdown

Fig. 2.1. Usage of educational online resources before lockdown

Fig. 2.2. Usage of educational online resources during lockdown
Pre lockdown, roughly 3% were using online resources; whereas, during lockdown, that significantly increased to 18.2% suggestive of a pivot towards online learning. On the contrary, 6% were not revising at all, however during lockdown this increased to 33.3%, this could possibly come corollary to exam cancellations or a lack of motivation.

Initially 3% did not have any face-to-face interaction, however, during lockdown this rose to 36.4%. Pre lockdown 60.6% had face-to-face interaction regularly which drastically reduced to 6.1% owing to strict social restrictions as an attempt to prevent the spread of the virus. There has been a dramatic shift to the left on the scale (Fig. 3.2) referring to the level of face-to-face interactions.

Pre lockdown, 51.6% felt lonely, however, during lockdown the numbers increased to 78.8%. Initially, 3% felt they had no one to talk to however this rose to 9.1% during lockdown. There was also a dramatic increase from 12.1% to 33.3% in the amount of people that felt slightly lonely. This is surprising considering the increased use of social media and face-to-face interaction within the household. There is a general transition towards the right on the scale (Figs. 4.1 & 4.2), indicating an overall increase in the extent of loneliness.

**Fig. 3.1. Face-to-face interaction with people outside the household before lockdown**

**Fig. 3.2. Face-to-face interaction with people outside the household during lockdown**

**Fig. 4.1. Extent of loneliness felt before lockdown**
3% felt demotivated pre lockdown however, this increased to 33.3% during lockdown. Pre lockdown, 48.5% felt motivated, however, this significantly fell to 12.1% during lockdown. A distinct decrease in the level of motivation can be observed by the shift towards the right on the scale (Figs. 5.1 & 5.2).

Pre lockdown, GCSE and A-level examinations were due to have taken place in the summer term, however, the Secretary of State for Education, U.K. announced that the 2020 exam series in England would be cancelled to help fight the spread of coronavirus [4]. This meant that the grades awarded would be teacher submitted after considering performance on mock exams and non-exam assessment [5]. Before exams were cancelled, 40.6% were worried and 37.5% were very worried however, after cancellations only 9.4% were worried and interestingly 25% of students are still very worried. This variation could be due to the cohort of students due to appear for the exams this academic year. Also, to factor are the concerns of students regarding school closure which may impact their performance in the exams conducted the following year.

Fig. 4.2. Extent of loneliness felt during lockdown

Fig. 5.1. Level of motivation before lockdown

Fig. 5.2. Level of motivation during lockdown
mental health problems such as social anxiety in the post-COVID era as teenagers would not be exposed to assessing facial expressions and body language in a face-to-face conversation instilling a lack of confidence leading to social phobia once lockdown is lifted. Experts believe nervousness, fear of contamination, panic attacks, sleep disturbances, helplessness, tendency to seek constant reassurance and probability of an uncertain future seem to be the major triggers leading to depression and anxiety [12] among the student community.

Pre-COVID, there had been a rise in mental health issues amongst students due to anxiety and stress accompanying academic pressures. It can be observed that this issue is more common amongst high-achieving students as they face an overwhelming pressure to succeed [13]. With lockdown now in place, students have less opportunity to ‘release steam’ through team sporting activities and spending time with friends making them more prone to developing mental health problems such as loneliness as depicted in our survey (Figs. 4.1 & 4.2). There also seems to be a lack of closure regarding exams as they were abruptly cancelled and did not provide a cathartic experience for students who were due to take their exams this year. Some students have stated that ‘they feel like they don’t have a
purpose’ and ‘feel like they don’t need to do anything because there is no point’. Here, issues regarding lack of motivation can be brought into sharp relief considering the absence of short-term goals, this is manifested by the increase in students who are not revising during lockdown presented by the above findings. The changes of social integration with scarcity of face-to-face interactions may have had an impact on competition amongst peers resulting in a devoid of incentive.

Although academic stressors such as exam stress have reduced due to cancellations of exams, the stressors have shifted to worries about the health of family and friends as well as anxiety regarding the uncertainty of the future [14]. As a result of these increased stressors, the role of mental health professionals in schools which was limited needs to be relooked. Mental health professionals are valuable members of the school support faculty over the years catering to the mental health needs and well-being of the student community. Post COVID, their role in the school support systems will be exigent. Embedding mental health services into the school system provides access to advice on how to improve their mental health [15], in order to create ideal conditions for overall development—both academically and socially.

5. CONCLUSION

Although implementing lockdown during the COVID era has demonstrated a cause-effect relationship, no causation between social media usage and mental health problems amongst students was observed when viewed independently, but instead showed a strong correlation as noted in our survey. Educational psychologists may need to envisage into the shoes of mental health professionals post-COVID which can be challenging to the educational systems across the world. The impact of lockdown has clearly indicated the need for this change as noted in our findings. Variables that need to be considered are family structure and inter-personal relationships within the household. However, large cohort studies need to be done to validate this argument.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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