



Psycho-social Impact of Covid 19 and Technological Intervention towards Preserving Social Interactions in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

COVID 19 pandemic has been made plenty of socio-economic and health crisis in worldwide. The research problem in this study was, how does technology intervene in social interaction and the research question was 'what is the psycho-social effects of social distance during the Covid 19 period'. Study Objectives were limited to identifying the features of the psycho-social situation of students who are in the age group of 18-25 and to identifying the technological impact of maintaining social interaction. The alternative hypothesis was, 'there is an impact between technological intervention towards preserving social interactions. The ontological approach of this research is objectivism and the epistemological approach is positivistic. The research type is descriptive, cross-sectional and quantitative. The research was designed with a survey method. The hypothesis was tested through validated questionnaires. The sample was obtained using the simple random method which is representing the probability sampling method. There is more time to spend with family members. Family contact for more than 16 hours has been increased by 9%. Talking time with friends has been increased. The time allocated for studies has been relatively reduced. But the time for leisure time activities has been increased. Outdoor sports by young people have dropped by 32%. Young people are isolated in every way. Young people use technology to reduce distance. The most common devices are smartphones and laptops. 47% of young people have not seen a doctor during the Covid period for any disease. Only about 10% have seen a doctor for mucosal diseases. About 50% of young people have stress. Anxiety and depression are also more with young people. There is no mental disease with 33% of them. They mostly feel loneliness, tension, and frustration. But some of them feel relaxed and happy. 50% of them feel that they have extra time during this period. They use it to chat with family members and friends. But they lost their extra-curricula activities. They have an idea to adjust to new normal situations via technology.

Keywords

Psycho-social impact; Covid 19; Technological intervention; Social interactions; E-community

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1. Introduction

There were many pandemics and epidemics with killed millions in human history. Black death, an American polio epidemic, Spanish flu, Asian flu, H1N1, Ebola were among them. COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis that has simultaneously affected different countries and communities across the globe. Although first reported in China in December 2019, it has been declared as an International public health emergency by the World (Joshi, 2021). The health sector advises society to maintain social distance and to stay at home. The government announced lockdowns from time to time. Institutes implement the system of work from home and roster systems.

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Schools were closed. Covid pandemic took two years from people and it makes high levels of uncertainty regarding the future, and financial insecurity raises the level of stress, anxiety, and depression etc. ‘Pandemic, distancing, sanitized, non-essential, lockdown, isolation, quarantine, vaccine and new normal situation’ are the special words that are used in this period (Kahil, 2021). Keeping social distance make many social, economic and psychological impacts on society. Many scholars have raised this matter. According to them, a number of actions taken in recent days are designed to encourage social distancing, including:

- Schools, colleges, and universities suspending in-person classes and converting to remote online instruction
- Cities cancelling events, including sporting events, festivals, and parades
- Workplaces encouraging or mandating flexible work options, including telecommuting
- Organizations and businesses cancelling large gatherings, including conference
- Houses of worship suspending services (Pearce, 2020).

Ahmad and Murad quoted from UNICEF about the Psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; ‘Acute panic attacks, Significant positive statistical correlation between self-reported social media use and the spread of panic related to Covid-19, Stress, fear and anxiety during physical distancing seen in children and adults, Obsessive behaviours, Hoarding, Paranoia, Depression and Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the long run’ (Joshi, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in the prevalence of perinatal anxiety and depression among Sri Lankan pregnant women with no proven/known COVID-19 infection (Patabendige et al., 2020). It can be produced acute panic, anxiety, obsessive behaviours, hoarding, paranoia, and depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the long run. These have been fueled by an “infodemic” spread via different platforms of social media (Dubey et al., 2020). Scientists still work with their investigations. It may take considerable time. But as human beings, people need to share their feelings among their friends, peers and colleagues (Kingsley, 2004). Technology will take part to connect people.

1.1. Problem Statement

The pandemic season can affect people in many ways. It has a profound effect on the health and way of life of a country. The Covid 19 pandemic has had largely negative and, to a lesser extent, positive effects not only in Sri Lanka but in every country in the world. Its impact on economic, social well-being is being studied by scholars. The impact on social relations should be considered by examining the impact of maintaining social distance. Maintaining social distance is essential for controlling epidemics. It can be analyzed from different angles. The psychosocial aspect is one aspect of it. Physical distancing, which is one form of social contact to free people from the epidemic, has a direct impact on social interaction. The occurrence of social isolation is one of the most serious conditions that can occur there. Therefore, the research problem was, how does technology intervene in social interactions?

Research question

What are the psycho-social effects of social distance during the Covid 19 period?

Objectives

- To identify the features of the psycho-social situation of students who are in the age group of 18-25.
- To identify the technological impact of maintaining social interaction.

Hypothesis

Ha: There is an impact between technological intervention and preserving social interactions.

H0: There is no impact between technological intervention and preserving social interactions.

2. Literature Review

There are few published results about e-society and technological intervene to maintain social interactions. I have summarized some of them to find out the research gap as below.

Skalacka and Pajestka (2021): Article on ‘Digital or In-Person: The Relationship Between Mode of Interpersonal Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Mental Health in Older Adults From 27 Countries’ revealed interpersonal communication during pandemic situations among adults. Social distancing has limited the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) but has also changed communication patterns. However, studies of how mental health in older adults relates to the usage of different modes of interpersonal communication are sparse. This study aimed to analyze how COVID-19-related changes in the frequencies of using different modes of communication (digital or in-person) have influenced mental health in older adults from 27 countries.

Riva et al. (2020): The article on ‘Positive Technology and COVID-19 show significant information. In this article, they discussed the potential of Positive Technology to augment and enhance the existing strategies for generating psychological well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular different positive technologies—m-Health and smartphone apps, stand-alone and social virtual reality, video games, exergames, and social technologies—have the potential of enhancing different critical features of our personal experience— affective quality, engagement/actualization, and connectedness—that are challenged by the pandemic and its social and economic effects.

Sundarasan et al. (2020): The article on ‘Psychological Impact of COVID-19 and Lockdown among University Students in Malaysia: Implications and Policy Recommendations’ discussed the stressful situation and consequences among university students. This study examines its impact on the anxiety level of university students in Malaysia during the peak of the crisis and the pertinent characteristics affecting their anxiety. The main stressors include financial constraints, remote online teaching and uncertainty about the future with regard to academics and career. Stressors are predominantly financial constraints, remote online learning, and uncertainty related to their academic performance, and future career prospects.

Leal Filho et al. (2021): According to the article on ‘Impacts of COVID-19 and social isolation on academic staff and students at universities: a cross-sectional study’ social isolation is one of the significant issues with university people. The study reveals that 90% of the respondents have been affected by the shutdown and unable to perform normal work or studies at their institution for between 1 week to 2 months. While 70% of the respondents perceive negative impacts of COVID 19 on their work or studies, more than 60% of them value the additional time that they have had indoors with families and others. While the majority of the respondents agree that they suffered from the lack of social interaction and communication during the social distancing/isolation, there were significant differences in the reactions to the lockdowns between academic staff and students.

According to previous research findings, there is a challenge as well as potentials to make the platform to enhance digital/ virtual lifestyle in future for e-community.

3. Methodology

The ontological approach of this research is objectivism and the epistemological approach is positivistic. The research type is descriptive, cross-sectional and quantitative. The research was designed with a survey method. The hypothesis was tested through validated questionnaires. The sample was obtained using the simple random method which is representing the probability sampling method. Ethical approval was not required for this study, as basic psych-social questions.

4. Results

4.1. Basic data of the study

The questionnaire-based study was taken to this basic study. The sample consists of 100 respondents who are randomly obtained from age between 18-25. According to field data, 65% were females and 35% were males. 72% were in age between 19-22 and 27% were in age between 23-25. 1% were above age 26. 77% are undergraduate students. 19% are schooling. 3% are working. 55% are studying in the science stream and 25% are studying in the commerce stream. 11% are in the arts stream and 9% of the respondents are studying in stream of Technology.

4.2. Preserving Relationships During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the individual is a socio-cultural animal, social interactions play a major role. According to MacIver (1952) ‘Society is a system of usages and procedures, of authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions, of controls of human behaviour and liberties. This ever-changing, complex system we call a society. It is the web of social relationships. And it is always changing’. Three basic forms of social interactions can be identified. These are relationships between two people, group relationships, and institutional relationships. According to Homans et al. (1993). ‘When a number of persons have come together to form a group, their behaviour never holds to its first pattern’ (Homans et al., 1993, p. 109). Individual behaviour in the existing context Always changes. Also, a person changes his behaviour in response to changes in the environment. Family relationships and close friendships are very important in everyday life. The nature of a person's behaviour during an epidemic season is more physically and mentally different than usual. Social connections are unavoidable. Social integration, social cohesion, and collective thinking affect an individual's personality. Goffman discussed in his doctoral thesis; he compares society to the human body. “The interactions we have in mind when we talk about ‘society’ are crystallized as definable, consistent structures such as the state and the family, the guild and the church, social classes and organizations based on common interests (Manning, 2007, p. 20).

The last two decades have witnessed a number of significant social, economic, political and cultural changes in Sri Lanka as in many other parts of the world. Changes have occurred in the education system, political values, economic system, job market as well as family structure. The traditional extended family system was replaced by the nuclear family system (Samarakoon & Usoof, 2019). The social status of women has been changed. The woman became a prominent figure in the job market. As the school became a place where more competitive goals were pursued, the students became much busier. The two main institutions that interact with students, in particular, are the family and the school or university. Let's look at the nature of the interactions that respondents have with family members before and during the pandemic.

Table 1. Time allocation for the chat with the family members

Time allocation	Before Covid 19	During Covid 19
< 2 hours	47%	21%
2 – 5 hours	34%	42%
6 – 10 hours	14%	19%
11 – 15 hours	4%	8%
16 > hours	1%	10%

Source: Field data, 2021

There is a positive trend that children have considerable time to talk with their parents compared to the time before the pandemic. Children engage with their studies online. Most parents who are working in different places have a chance to work from home as well. Both parties have considerable time to share their ideas and feelings than before. The results of this work will shed light on the understating of social cohesion and interactions. Only 1% of family members had contact for more than 16 hours before

the outbreak but it has increased up to 10% during the Covid period. Less than two hours of contact among family members was 47% but it has dropped as low as 21%. It is a 26% reduction when it compares before and after of Covid 19.

“Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains” (Rosen, 1969, p. 274). Study results emphasize the importance of keeping peers always. It's also important to find out how young people are interacting with their peers. It also has vital changes rather than before. For instance, chatting hours of 11-15 hours before the pandemic was 3%, but during the pandemic, it was coming up to 41%. It is a 38% of growth when compared to before Covid.

Table 2. Time allocation for the chat with the friends

Time allocation	Before Covid 19	During Covid 19
< 2 hours	38%	42%
2 – 5 hours	45%	41%
6 – 10 hours	12%	11%
11 – 15 hours	3%	41%
16 > hours	2%	2%

Source: Field data, 2021

An overwhelming majority of youth have increased their habit of chatting with friends during this pandemic situation. But time allocation for study has been decreased generally. One of the reasons for this is the closure of the school. Most students engage in self-learning. These data revealed that a highly effective mode of learning is still a formal schooling system. We have to incorporate other studies on education to reveal the real situation furthermore regarding this.

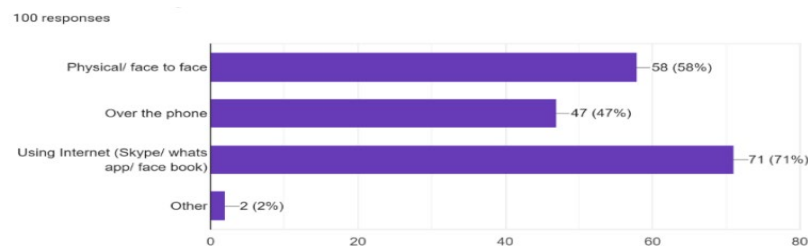


Figure 1. Method of chatting with friends (before Covid 19) (Source: Field data, 2021)

This is an important finding in the understanding of the mode of chatting with friends before Covid 19. Youth have a practice with chatting using internet facilities such as Skype, WhatsApp, Facebook so on. It was a considerable percentage. They had 58% face to face chat with friends even before the Covid situation. 47% of them had used phones for their conversations even before covid 19.

When compared with other countries, there is a long studenthood in Sri Lanka. It has increased more during this pandemic period. Leaving university is usually occur after the age of 25 under normal circumstances. It is a common occurrence in this country that a large percentage of young people between the ages of 18-25 are engaged in learning.

Table 3. Time allocation for study

Time allocation	Before Covid 19	During Covid 19
< 2 hours	14%	24%
2 – 5 hours	39%	38%
6 – 10 hours	34%	30%
11 – 15 hours	11%	7%
16 > hours	2%	1%

Source: Field data, 2021

The study believes that reported results are of significance for enhancing technological facilities and preparing for a new normal lifestyle for a better society. Leisure time and recreation activities are more important towards building interrelationships among the youth. It has the same value for the growth of physical and mental development. Reading books, Watching TV/ film/ Listening to radio/ songs, Gardening, Outdoor /Indoor physical sports, Computer games and Chatting are the most common activities for them. Reading books is one of the most popular leisure-time activities in Sri Lanka. Many pieces of research have mentioned the need for popular library facilities in the country (Abeysinghe, 2020; Lunga, 2020; Wanigasooriya, 2008; Wanigasooriya, 2013; Wijewardhana, 2015). Outdoor games were the most popular recreational activity in traditional society. But it had slightly changed during the last couple of decades. Modern technology and electronic devices are the vital cause of that transformation. Television, computer, smartphone and other innovations of social media are directly involved with this alteration.

Every person engages with leisure time activities such as bicycling, bowling, riding, golfing, hiking, walking, skating, swimming so on. In addition; painting, drawing, reading, listening to music or meditating are also popular in this regard. This pandemic situation has challenged sportive activities. Children have to engage with indoor or aesthetic activities. On the other hand, they work with technology closely. Let see what they have demonstrated before and during Covid 19 period in relation to recreational things.

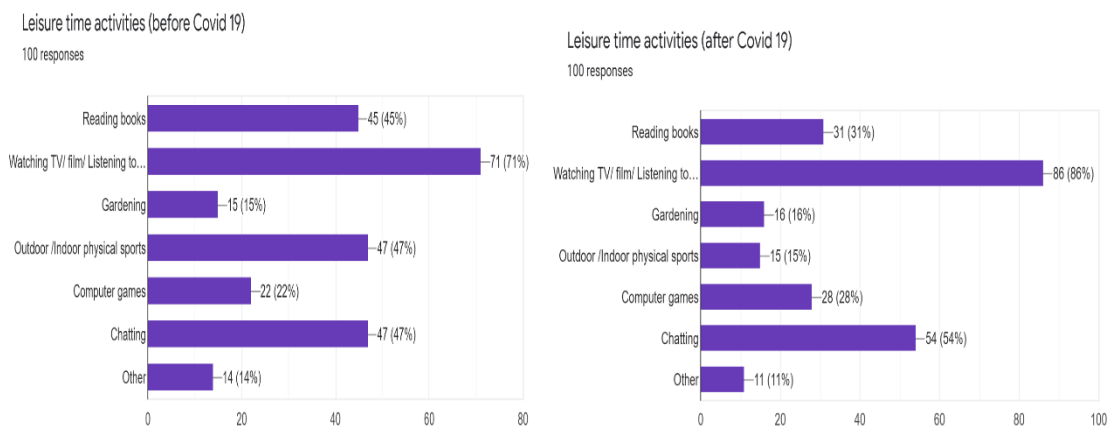


Figure 2. Leisure time activities (before and during Covid 19) (Source: Field data, 2021)

According to field data, the most significant factor is the decrease in youth participation in outdoor and indoor physical sports. It was dropped from 47% to 15%. It is a drop of 21% when it is compared with before Covid 19. Reading habits also dropped from 45% to 31%. But instead of that watching TV/ film/ Listening to radio/ songs rate has become more popular. In addition to that, ‘chat with friends’ also increase. This finding may lead to a better understanding of how people engage with leisure time activities. According to the sociological point of view, each person is different in every aspect. “That persons differ from one another not only because of biological variation but also because of sociological variation. The first great source of individual variation is the cultural difference. One individual may differ from another because he has a different culture” (Davies, 2004, p. 249).

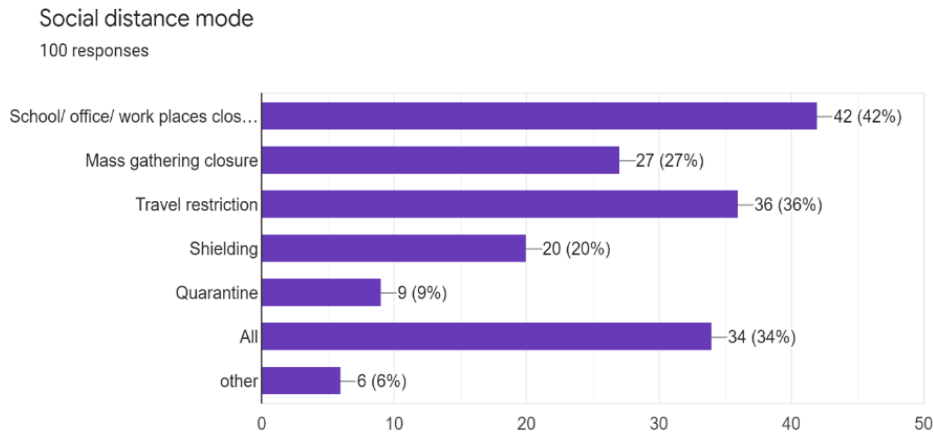


Figure 3. Social distance mode (Source: Field data, 2021)

The ministry of health has advised the citizens to keep physical distance to prevent the pandemic. All citizens worked to preserve social distance. The government on several occasions shut down the country completely and in part also. Accordingly, schools and workplaces, as well as offices, were closed for a period of time. It has happened in various manners. It is revealed from below mentioned graph. Literature on this topic is plentiful as; “Social distancing is a public health practice that aims to prevent sick people from coming in close contact with healthy people in order to reduce opportunities for disease transmission. It can include large-scale measures like cancelling group events or closing public spaces, as well as individual decisions such as avoiding crowds.” (Pearce, 2020).

Generally, people attempted to find various methods to communicate with each other and for work. Most common and popular method is using electronic devices such as TV, radio, computers and phones.

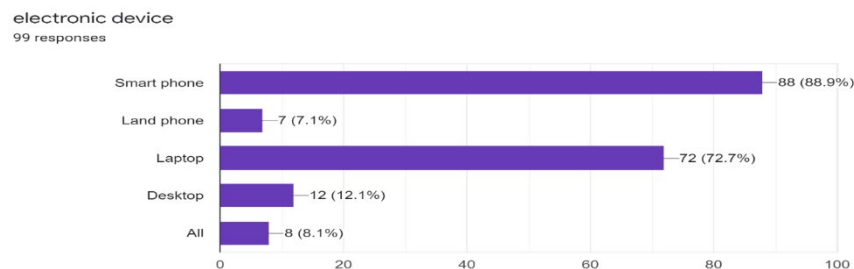


Figure 4. The mode of electronic devices (Source: Field data, 2021)

Youth have selected smartphones and laptops for their communications, recreations and studies. Every home has a television and more than 80% of them have radio sets. When we consider computer devices; 89% of them have smartphones, the rest of them use a landline phone, laptops, and desktops also. They use these devices for learning, recreation and communication purposes.

Another vital finding was that approximately 9% of youth have all the devices. Our findings on mode of device and usage of it; at least hint that people have an idea on preparation to new normal situation. It gives an idea that they pretended to work with new technology, or they accepted the new challenge

4.3. Psychological Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic towards maintaining social interactions.

In this section, we will illustrate some experimental results on psycho-social facts of this situation related to social interactions. The results demonstrate two things. First, a positive aspect of covid 19

situation and secondly the negative feelings of this situation. “The language of sociology traditionally deals with organizations, structures, roles and statues and is not well adapted to describe the behaviour of persons by virtue of their presence among one another.The term 'interaction' alas, has meant everything, and the units of analysis required if we are to focus on face-to-face interaction have been little considered” (Goffman & Best, 1967, p. 144). Therefore, there is a background factor to discuss even the virtual interaction. Hence, e-communication or cyberculture will be stabilized further.

A further novel finding regarding physical illness was that 47% of them have not seen the doctor at least once during the covid situation. 34% of them visited the doctor for getting treatments for Headache/Stomachache/ joints to ache so on. No one had gone for non-communicable diseases such as pressure/diabetes/ cholesterol etc. There was no one for leprosy/ itching/ sores etc. Although nearly 10% of the youth had visited the doctor for influenzas/ cough/migraine. This is a good trend in preventing diseases.

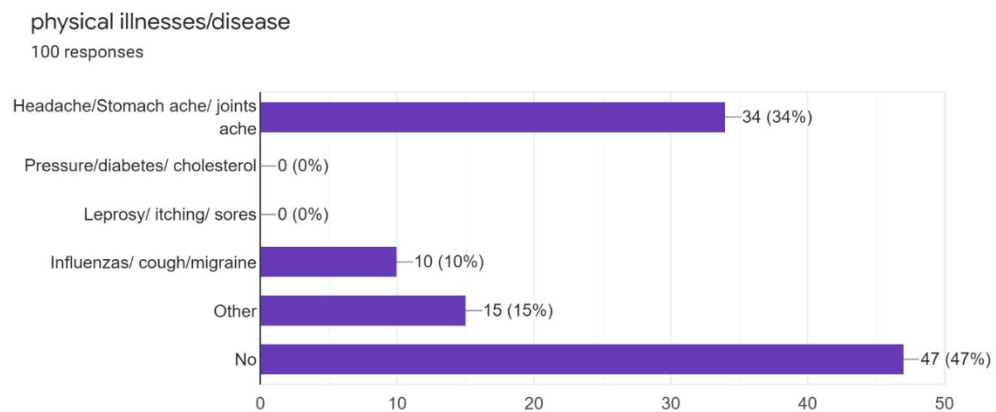


Figure 5. The types of physical illnesses (Source: Field data, 2021)

People of this age stayed at home for nearly two years. But they suffered very least from physical sicknesses. But the general situation before the pandemic was different.

This is consistent with what has been found in physical sickness to mental illnesses. Anxiety, depression, OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder; obsessive thoughts and compulsive actions, such as cleaning, checking, counting, or hoarding), post-traumatic stress and fear of transmitting infection were given for the sample answers.

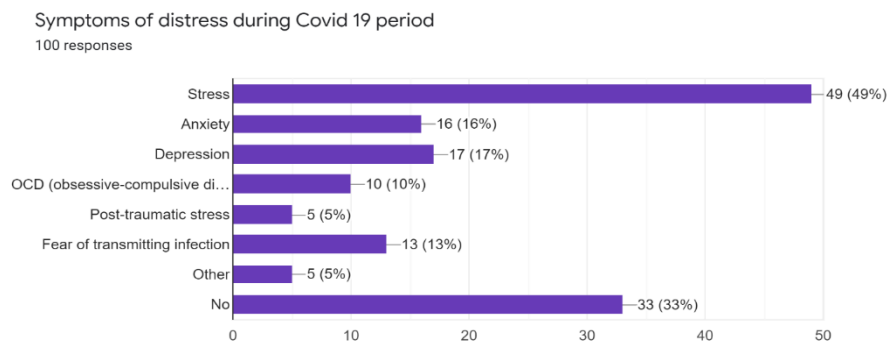


Figure 6. The types of mental inconveniences (Source: Field data, 2021)

Approximately 50% of youth are suffering from stress. Unstable social, economic and political as well as health issues have contributed to this. A considerable amount of youth has anxiety and depression. It was 16% and 17% respectively. Fear of transmitting infection is also a mental factor, that number is 13%. OCD is one of the most common mental illnesses among youth. This account for 10% of the total number. School counsellors, family counsellors and professional counsellors have the

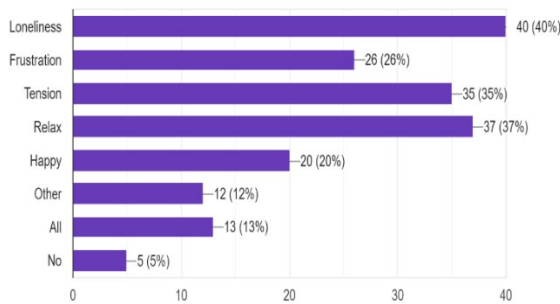
responsibility to prevent this situation. ‘Given the role and importance of the school counsellor as emphasized here as a leader and compiler and at the same time implementer of the school program and counselling process, we can say that not only in theory but this role and importance should be seen in school practice’ (Ziberi & Macedonia, 2020).

A further novel finding is that 40% of youth has loneliness during this pandemic situation. They missed their friends and peers. Although 37% of them feel relaxed and 20% are feeling happy.

Frustration and tension have taken place in the second and third. “Dimensions of the effective model of educational guidance of student’s are, respectively, talent identification, legal factors, effective policies, structural and managerial, IT, knowledge, family and society factors” (Niazazari et al., 2020). (See for further knowledge; (Tyilo & Shumba, 2020).

Every event can have both positive and negative consequences. People spent more than 12 hours for work and studying before Covid 19. They had a few hours to stay at home. They engaged with a kind of complex and tied schedule. But people have time to work from home during this period. Parents and children both have considerable time to see each other. 47% of family members chat below 2 hours per day before Covid but it was increased up to 2-5 hours per day during the Covid period.

Feelings during Covid 19 period
100 responses



“Actually ...I am a A/I student ...if the school hold as normally ..I will take a good result ..but because of this pandemic am very scared about my result coz I haven’t still compared my level with other students ..so for solution I think that even from online exams should be held ..means like term test ...which students should definitely participate without copying answers ...”

Figure 7. Feelings during Covid 19 time period (Source: Field data, 2021)

It is found that people feel this situation differently. 58% of youth are happy with their extra time. The rest of that 24% of youth ‘have no idea’ towards this social distance. In contrast to that finding, 61% of youth don’t like this uniform lifestyle. But 16% of youth like this uniform life pattern. Approximately 50% of youth have said that they have remained time and 28% said that they have a chance to remain money also.34% of youth have mentioned they had a chance to avoid unnecessary social connections. It is by now generally accepted that they have time to find or identify self and 33% of them have mentioned that they had a chance to identify self-goals.

Benefits that had when maintaining interactions during Covid 19 period
100 responses

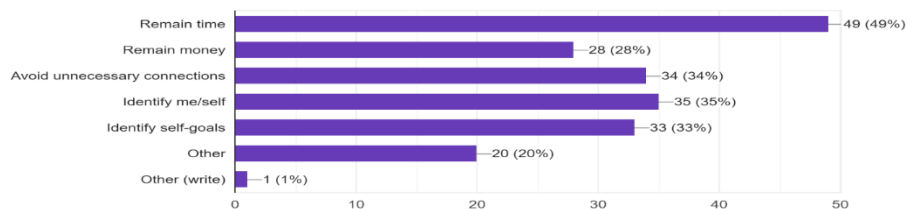


Figure 8. Benefits of maintaining social interactions during Covid 19 (Source: Field data, 2021)

The above-mentioned graph shows that youth has used this period to find their life aspirations. They had a good time for them. But it did not say their consent to live alone. They had limited their social interactions. It is important to highlight the fact that, what they have lost and gained during this pandemic situation towards maintaining social distance. It shows by the below-mentioned graph clearly.

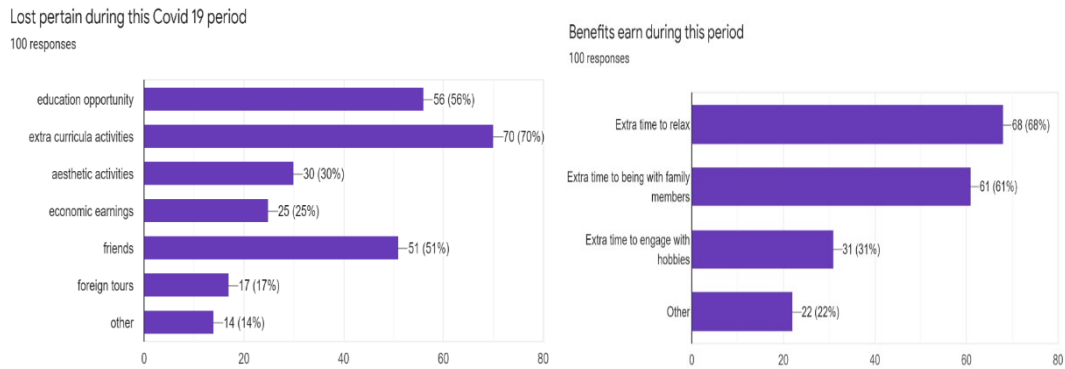


Figure 9. Lost pertain during and after Covid 19 (Source: Field data, 2021)

It is notable that, 70% of them missed their extra-curricula activities; especially sportive activities, outdoor aesthetic activities and other volunteer activities. 56% of the youth mentioned educational opportunities; they had 13 years of teacher centre-learning experience. They engaged with self-learning during the pandemic situation. 51% of youth missed their friends. Physical distance makes them socially isolated. On the other hand, 68% of them have extra time to relax. They enjoyed themselves with their family members. Not only that, they are meeting their friends virtually. They have extra time to engage with different hobbies. Technology is playing an immense role not only in supplying a good platform to talk with others but also in making a path to do hobbies. It is interesting to note that, youth have ideas on set with the new normal situation and maintain social interactions during this Covid 19 pandemic situation. Otherwise, they may search for crucial channels to make it convenient. Youth have a different choice at this age (Niranji et al., 2018; Wanigasooriya, 2013).

Alternative solutions to maintain social interactions during a pandemic situation

- Usage of social media. Using online media such as instant messaging, video calls etc. Holding virtual meetings and events. Arranging zoom meetings and virtual gatherings.
- Organizing more events like B&S drive-in concerts which can be conducted according to the health guidelines which will help to release stress and uplift mental health.
- Keep in touch with our loved ones in every possible safe way.
- Video conferencing with friends, engaging more actively in healthy relationships rather than being passive and not communicating, communicating with friends about your feelings so that if something happens you feel that you are not alone. Talking with parents, keeping a better relationship with your siblings.
- Multiplayer games to maintain my social relationships with peers.
- Blend with covid
- Living with covid

5. Conclusion

- There is more time to spend with family members during covid situations. Family contacts hours more than 16 hours increased by 9%. Talking time with friends between 11-15 hours has been grown by 38%. The time allocated for studies has been relatively reduced. But the time for leisure time activities has been increased.

- Outdoor sports by young people have dropped by 32% during this pandemic period. Young people are isolated in every way. Young people use technology to reduce distance. The most common of these are smartphones and laptops.

- 47% of young people have not seen a doctor during the Covid period for any disease. Only about 10% have seen a doctor for mucosal diseases. About 50% of young people have stress. Anxiety and depression are also more with young people. There is no mental disease with 33% of them. They

mostly feel loneliness, tension, and frustration. They limited their interactions of empathy toward their relatives, friends and neighbours. But some of them feel relaxed and happy.

- 50% of them feel that they have extra time during this period. They use it to chat with family members and friends. But they lost their extra-curricular activities.
- They have an idea to adjust to a new normal situation.

Social distance has affected the relationships among people. The hypothesis of Ha was proved by data. There is an impact between technological intervention and preserving social interactions. Technological devices have decreased the negative effects of the pandemic. The responsible stakeholders should take necessary actions to maintain social distance and enhance social interactions via technological potentials. It will take a path to reduce psycho-social issues of Covid 19.

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