The Pandemic Generation: Anxiety and Learning during COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented disruption to the process of learning globally. In response to the challenges of the new reality, the education system around the world has had to transform rapidly to digital modes of learning. While the new modes of learning have ensured the continuation of the process of learning, it has also impacted the process of learning on the social and emotional level of the students. The present paper examines the phenomenon of anxiety among students during the process of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper focuses on the impact of the sudden shift to the new modes of learning on the anxiety levels of the students. The paper uses the longitudinal method to examine the phenomenon of anxiety among students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper begins with 500 students between the ages of 15-17 years. The students were selected from the state of Uttarakhand. The students who continued to the next phase of the study were 400. The paper examines the phenomenon of anxiety among students during the COVID-19 pandemic using the anxiety scale. The paper also examines the phenomenon of anxiety among students during the COVID-19 pandemic with respect to the demographic factors of gender, district, socioeconomic status, and type of family. The paper concludes by arguing that the process of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has created a new form of anxiety among the students. The paper also concludes by arguing that the phenomenon of anxiety among students during the COVID-19 pandemic is an important aspect of the process of learning.

Keywords

Pandemic Generation, Adolescent Anxiety, Blended Learning, Youth Precarity, COVID-19 Education

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a crisis in terms of education around the world that no one could have anticipated. At the beginning of 2020, educational institutions around almost every country in the world closed their doors to try to combat the spread of the virus. This impacted more than 1.6 billion students. In response to this, educational institutions had to rely on digital means of learning, including a combination of online learning and limited face-to-face interactions. This is not to say that educational institutions had to make a simple change to how they teach. The pandemic has fundamentally altered how educational institutions teach. Classrooms are now online, teachers are now guides for online learning, and students have to learn to manage themselves more than they used to. This is particularly pertinent to adolescents because they are a part of a stage of development when emotional, cognitive, and social development is in full swing. The psychosocial effects of the pandemic on students, including anxiety, is a significant issue. Anxiety is a state of constant worry, fear, or tension that is a reaction to a potentially threatening or unknown situation (American Psychological Association, 2022). Anxiety is a normal part of human experience, but when it persists, it has negative effects.

In addition, teens experienced multiple sources of anxiety. These include their health concerns over the pandemic, their academic progress, technology, and social lives. The shift to a hybrid learning environment introduced new sources of anxiety, which include digital technology, digital exams, and blurring boundaries between home and school. This period marked a new generation that could be termed the "pandemic generation." This is because their learning environment was a hybrid of technology and crises. Unlike other generations, their learning environment was characterized by lockdowns, virtual classes, and uncertainty. In understanding future education policies, it is important to understand the emotional realities of this new generation. This paper examines the anxiety experienced by teens in pandemic-era learning. It focuses on data collected from school students in Uttarakhand, India. In addition, it focuses on anxiety to understand how teens coped with the emotional demands of hybrid learning.

Theoretical Framework: Pandemic Generation, Youth Precarity, and Digital Education

If we speak of the pandemic generation, we are referring to a generation of youth whose educational journey was heavily influenced by the pandemic. Like the rest of the population, students too went through a schooling experience amidst uncertainty, isolation, and rapid technological advancements.

To teenagers, such a schooling experience can have long-term effects on their psychological state as well as their academic performance. The pandemic has created a schooling world completely different from the one before the pandemic, giving rise to the question of the impact it may have on the emotional state of the students. Youth precarity is a framework through which we can understand the anxiety experienced by the youth during the pandemic. Precarity is a state of uncertainty, instability, or insecurity, which is a major obstacle to a better future. In the context of schooling, precarity can be defined as a state of uncertainty in the academic calendar or the availability of academic tools.Throughout the period of the pandemic, the precarity of education has been on the increase. The sudden closure of schools, the constant reworking of the examination process, and the digital divide between the rich and the poor have created an environment where the student cannot predict the course of their own education. So, the anxiety of the adolescents during the process of digital education can be seen as a response to the precarity of the overall education system.

The digital revolution has been hailed as a breakthrough in the field of education. There is no doubt it has opened new avenues of access to education. Researchers, however, have increasingly pointed out the ways in which digital education has affected the emotional and social experience of the students.In the traditional system of education, the process of learning takes place within the boundaries of a predictable social experience. The students interact with each other on a day-to-day basis. In the digital system of education, the process of learning has become much more solitary. The shift to the blended system of learning has created new emotional experiences for the students. The process of adapting to the digital system of learning has become the key to the overall process of education.

2. Literature Review

Generally, anxiety is a major psychological condition experienced by teenagers, characterized by persistent worrying, nervousness, tension, and physiological responses to perceived ambiguous or threatening situations (American Psychological Association, 2022). Adolescence is a critical period of rapid growth, where various cognitive, social, and emotional developments influence how adolescents cope with anxiety. In addition, various demands from school, peers, and uncertainty about the future contribute to the anxiety experienced by adolescents (Blakemore, 2019). Even before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, various studies established that anxiety was a major condition experienced by teenagers, which may affect their performance in school. The school environment is a vital aspect of a teenager's emotional well-being because it provides not only academic

support but also emotional support.COVID-19 has caused a lot of uncertainty in the life of a teenager. For instance, the lockdown, closure of schools, and disruption of the daily routine have caused a lot of anxiety in the life of a teenager. In various studies on the impact of the pandemic on the emotional well-being of children, it was evident that the anxiety levels experienced by children increased.For example, Racine et al. (2021) established that the prevalence of clinically significant anxiety symptoms experienced by teenagers almost doubled in the first year of the pandemic. In various studies on the impact of the pandemic on the emotional well-being of children, it was evident that the anxiety levels experienced by children increased.

"The pandemic has catapulted education into the digital age in ways that were unimaginable just a few years ago. Education has had to adapt rapidly to the reality of virtual classrooms and video conferencing in order for the wheels of education to keep turning." Blended learning has been the most popular form of education in the recent past and has been highly praised for its ability to increase flexibility and access to resources (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).However, the unscripted transition into the digital age has also brought about unique forms of anxiety among the students. The main sources of anxiety have been the technological challenges that many of the students have had to endure. These technological challenges have added another layer of stress for the students, and this has been more pronounced for the disadvantaged in society.

Furthermore, the virtual world has been associated with the suppression of social interaction. Teenagers need other people for their development and growth, and the lack of social interaction has increased the rate of anxiety among the students.Socioeconomic Inequality and Educational AnxietyThe move to online learning highlighted the differences that already existed in our education system. Not everyone is on an equal footing when it comes to technology and online learning. There are bigger barriers to success for those from lower-income families when it comes to effectively engaging in online learning.These differences can lead to educational anxiety related to a student's academic progress and success. If a student is not able to depend on a reliable internet connection and a reliable device to use for online learning, it becomes more difficult to participate in online classes and complete homework assignments, and their stress levels go higher.

Research on digital inequality during the pandemic highlighted that it is not just a logistical issue but also a psychosocial one. If a student feels that he/she is not able to fully participate in the online learning process, it can affect their perception of their academic competence and their psychosocial well-being.There is a wealth of research that points to an increase in anxiety levels among students as the start of

online learning during the pandemic approached. However, some research suggests that students gradually adjust to the move to hybrid learning. As both teachers and students adjust to using technology to facilitate learning, the initial stress levels related to making the move to technology may ease.However, as students adapt to the move to technology and hybrid learning, their stress levels do not disappear but may change from technology to other issues related to their academic success and future opportunities. Understanding how teenagers experience anxiety is important to creating a supportive environment for learning and to contributing to the body of research on the psychosocial impact of digital learning. Anxiety is an important factor to consider as it is experienced throughout the different phases of online learning during the pandemic.

3. Anxiety, Academic Uncertainty, and Examination Stress

A large part of the stress and anxiety that adolescents experienced during the COVID-19 period stemmed from the lack of understanding regarding how academic evaluations and exams would be conducted. The academic process had been repeatedly disrupted in schools around the world because tests were often postponed or canceled and had been changed to new forms of evaluation. This was particularly stressful for adolescents who were in the process of studying and preparing for major exams such as board tests or university entrance exams.Exams play a central role in the academic process in many countries and regions where passing these tests has a direct correlation with future opportunities and prospects. In most such systems, the academic process involves structured study and guidance from teachers and mentors for the purpose of preparation and study for exams. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the academic process into self-study and independent study through the internet and other technological means (Daniel, 2020).According to studies conducted during this period, the unpredictability of the academic process was a major cause of stress and anxiety among adolescents. It has been noted in various reports that many adolescents were stressed and anxious about the fairness and reliability of the tests conducted through the internet and the disruption in the academic calendar and its impact on their future prospects (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020).In addition to these issues, the switch to the internet and other technological means for tests and exams also brought its own stress and anxiety because adolescents were concerned that technical issues might occur during the tests and exams and affect the results (Dhawan, 2020).

Furthermore, the lack of traditional classroom settings has also resulted in the lack of opportunities for collaborative study and the support of peers and classmates. The traditional classroom setting has provided many opportunities for

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collaborative and joint study and has helped many adolescents reduce stress and anxiety regarding exams and tests through discussions and interactions in the classroom (Cao et al., 2020).These conditions illustrate how pandemic-era education intensified academic precarity among adolescents. Anxiety during this period was therefore not only a response to the health crisis but also a consequence of the unpredictability of educational systems operating under emergency conditions.

Social Isolation, Peer Interaction, and Emotional Well-being

Another significant factor that contributed to anxiety among teens during the pandemic was the disruption of their regular social world. Schools are not only institutions for learning; they are also social environments where teens develop social connections, explore themselves, and build emotional support groups (Blakemore, 2019).Social interactions are a fundamental part of growing up. Interacting with peers on a daily basis is essential for developing social skills, managing emotions, and feeling a sense of belonging to a social group. These interactions act as a shield against psychological distress and anxiety (Steinberg, 2014).The pandemic, however, disrupted these social interactions by keeping students apart for long periods. The lockdowns and school closures meant that students no longer had opportunities to interact with peers during class or during social events.Yes, social media helped friends to remain connected during the pandemic. However, these interactions lacked the intimacy and spontaneity associated with social interactions. Interacting via digital media is a task-oriented activity that is filtered through a screen. This limits social interactions to a great extent (Ellis et al., 2020).

Studies on the effects of the pandemic on teens revealed that the mental health effects of prolonged social isolation during the pandemic were significant. The lockdowns that reduced peer interactions increased anxiety, loneliness, and emotional distress among students (Loades et al., 2020). Teens who experienced social isolation from their social support groups experienced more insecurity and anxiety.The general environment of crisis also contributed to anxiety among teens. The constant news about the pandemic, economic crises, and social crises created a stressful environment that impacted mental health. The constant news created a climate of anxiety that had a negative impact on mental well-being among teens (Guessoum et al., 2020). The data indicate that anxiety among teens during the pandemic was a result of a combination of disruptions to education and social interactions. Even when digital learning was efficient, it was not able to account for social interactions.

Resilience, Coping Strategies, and Psychological Adaptation

Throughout the pandemic years, despite all the difficulties of online schooling, teens have shown their grit in adapting to the new ways of schooling. Resilience,

therefore, is the ability to cope with adverse situations while maintaining the well-being of the mind when faced with stressful situations (Masten, 2014).What the research on the resilience of adolescents has to say is the inherent potential to be adaptable when the teens are surrounded by a supportive environment. Support from family, support from teachers, and support from friends can make a huge difference to the teens in coping with stressful situations (Compas et al., 2017).Throughout the pandemic, students have learned to cope with online schooling in their own ways. They have learned to develop a routine, utilize online resources to aid their studies, and stay connected to their teachers through online platforms (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

When schools reopened in hybrid fashion, students got a chance to stay connected socially too, which was a welcome change to the online schooling routine. Even a short interaction with teachers and peers has proven to have a positive effect on the mood of the students, helping to alleviate the feelings of loneliness too (Dhawan, 2020).Research on the psychological adaptations of students to the pandemic has proven that anxiety levels of the students have reduced over time as they have become more comfortable with online schooling and have learned to cope with the situations effectively (Racine et al., 2021).Resilience is not a badge to wear to dismiss the emotional toll of online schooling. It is the ability to ride through the adverse situations while still experiencing the emotional toll of the stressful situations.To understand the resilience of the pandemic generation of students, we need to understand their vulnerabilities as well as their ability to cope with the situations.

4. Methodology

The study employed a longitudinal research design to measure anxiety levels among adolescents during two different phases of pandemic-related learning.

Time 1 (T1) – Early phase of blended learning during the pandemic

Time 2 (T2) – Second phase of the study, after students had adapted to hybrid learning

The longitudinal research design allowed researchers to compare anxiety levels side by side during both phases.

For the sample, Initially, the study included 500 adolescents between 15-17 years old enrolled in government schools across Uttarakhand, India.The participants were enrolled in Class XI during the first phase. However, due to a decline in students during the pandemic, only 400 students participated during the second phase. This was because they had progressed to Class XII.The study included students from Almora and Nainital districts. The sample included both rural and urban educational institutions.

Instrument

The study used the Anxiety Scale (AS-SSDG) developed by Sarkar & Das

(2018). The scale measures emotional and physiological symptoms associated with anxiety.

Data Analysis; The study included: Descriptive statistics of anxiety levels, comparison of anxiety levels between T1 & T2 and comparison of anxiety levels among different demographic groups

5. Results

This section presents the findings related to anxiety among adolescents during blended learning in the COVID-19 period. The results are derived from the analysis of psychosocial variables measured at Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2) among school-going adolescents in Uttarakhand. The distribution of anxiety is examined across gender, district, and locale, followed by a comparison between T1 and T2. The results are based on the data presented in Tables 4.8, 4.9, 4.10, 4.14 and 4.20 of Chapter 4 of the thesis.

5.1 Gender-wise Distribution of Anxiety (T1)

Table 1: Gender Differences in Anxiety among Adolescents (T1)

Anxiety Level	Male	Female	Total	%
Extremely Low Anxiety	15	19	34	8.5
Low Anxiety	29	43	72	18.0
Below Average Anxiety	32	38	70	17.5
Average Anxiety	37	86	123	30.8
Above Average Anxiety	23	23	46	11.5
High Anxiety	18	21	39	9.8
Extremely High Anxiety	12	4	16	4.0
Total	166	234	400	100

$\chi^2 = 16.371$, $p = .012$ (significant)

Interpretation

The results indicate that the majority of adolescents reported average anxiety levels (30.8%), followed by low anxiety (18%) and below average anxiety (17.5%). A smaller proportion of students reported high anxiety (9.8%) and extremely high anxiety (4%).The chi-square value shows a statistically significant difference between males and females ($p < .05$). Female adolescents were slightly more represented in average anxiety levels, suggesting that girls experienced somewhat higher anxiety during blended learning compared to boys.

5.2 District-wise Distribution of Anxiety

Table 2: Anxiety among Adolescents by District

Anxiety Level	Almora	Nainital	Total	%
Extremely Low Anxiety	18	16	34	8.5
Low Anxiety	53	19	72	18.0
Below Average Anxiety	53	17	70	17.5
Average Anxiety	84	39	123	30.8
Above Average Anxiety	29	17	46	11.5
High Anxiety	14	25	39	9.8
Extremely High Anxiety	6	10	16	4.0
Total	251	149	400	100

$\chi^2 = 31.277$, $p = .001$

Interpretation

A district-wise comparison has revealed significant variations in the pattern of the spread of anxiety between Almora and Nainital districts at $p < .01$. In both the districts, the maximum percentage of teens, i.e., 30.8%, belonged to the average level of anxiety. However, with respect to the higher level of anxiety, Nainital has recorded a higher percentage of 16.8%, compared to 5.6% in Almora. This indicates the students of Nainital district were under more emotional pressure during the period of blended learning.

5.3 Locale-wise Distribution of Anxiety (Urban–Rural)

Table 3: Anxiety by Locale

Anxiety Level	Urban	Rural	Total	%
Extremely Low Anxiety	29	5	34	8.5
Low Anxiety	54	18	72	18.0
Below Average Anxiety	45	25	70	17.5
Average Anxiety	78	45	123	30.8
Above Average Anxiety	24	22	46	11.5
High Anxiety	24	15	39	9.8
Extremely High Anxiety	10	6	16	4.0
Total	264	136	400	100

$\chi^2 = 13.049$, $p = .042$

Interpretation

If we look at the differences based on the locale, it is evident that there is a statistically significant relationship between the levels of anxiety experienced by the students and their locale ($p < .05$). Most of the students were urban adolescents, and they were the ones who seemed to appear more frequently in all the anxiety

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levels. However, it is important to note that there were a considerable number of rural students in the average to above-average anxiety levels, which shows the anxiety experienced by adolescents in general.

5.4 Gender-wise Distribution of Anxiety (T2)

Table 4: Gender Differences in Anxiety at Time 2

Anxiety Level	Male	Female	Total	%
Extremely Low Anxiety	13	22	35	8.8
Low Anxiety	17	35	52	13.0
Below Average Anxiety	22	35	57	14.3
Average Anxiety	39	61	100	25.0
Above Average Anxiety	30	28	58	14.5
High Anxiety	19	36	55	13.8
Extremely High Anxiety	26	17	43	10.8
Total	166	234	400	100

$\chi^2 = 12.354$, $p = .055$

Interpretation

At Time 2, students were reporting more high and very high levels of anxiety, and fewer students were reporting low levels of anxiety. There were some differences between males and females, but the chi-square test revealed that there was no significant gender effect on levels of anxiety at T2 ($p > .05$).

5.5 Comparison of Anxiety Levels between T1 and T2

Table 5: Comparison of Anxiety at Time 1 and Time 2

Anxiety Level	T1 (N)	T1 (%)	T2 (N)	T2 (%)
Extremely Low Anxiety	34	8.5	35	8.8
Low Anxiety	72	18.0	52	13.0
Below Average Anxiety	70	17.5	57	14.3
Average Anxiety	123	30.8	100	25.0
Above Average Anxiety	46	11.5	58	14.5
High Anxiety	39	9.8	55	13.8
Extremely High Anxiety	16	4.0	43	10.8
Total	400	100	400	100

Interpretation

The data showing the comparison between T1 and T2 clearly illustrates the progression of increased anxiety levels over time. As the numbers decrease in the low and below-average categories, the numbers increase in the above-average, high, extremely high, categories.

More concretely:

- The extremely high anxiety level increases from 4.0% to 10.8%
- The high anxiety level increases from 9.8% to 13.8%
- The above-average anxiety level increases from 11.5% to 14.5%

These figures collectively show that the anxiety level of the youth has become stronger during the latter period of the blended learning experience, most likely because of the uncertainty, academic pressure, and other psychological effects of the COVID-19 experience.

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to examine the level of anxiety felt by school-age teens during the rollout of the blended learning program due to the COVID-19 pandemic.In the first phase of the blended learning rollout (T1), it was evident that the majority of adolescents felt average levels of anxiety. However, if the results are compared over the two periods, it is evident that the students with low or below-average anxiety levels reduced in the second phase (T2), while the students with above-average, high, and extremely high levels of anxiety increased. This shows the effect of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic on the educational system on the students.

If the results are compared over the different social groups, it was evident that there were considerable differences in the anxiety levels felt by the students. In the first phase, it was evident that the girls were more likely to be represented in the different levels of anxiety. However, such differences were reduced in the second phase. When the results were compared over the different districts, it was evident that Almora and Nainital showed considerable differences in the levels of anxiety felt by the students. When the results were compared over the urban and rural locations, it was evident that the students from the urban and rural locations felt similar levels of anxiety.

All things considered, the experience of blended learning during the pandemic was not merely about devices or innovative instructional techniques. Rather, it was a psychosocial experience that had a discernible impact on how adolescents experienced their emotional lives. Of course, anxiety levels had a tendency to increase over time, which implies that perhaps the perpetual state of academic ambiguity, less social interaction, and more emphasis on digital learning has been intensifying emotional pressure on students.

The study therefore argues strongly for mental health support to become part of our developing educational systems, especially if blended or device-based learning is a key part of that. Clearly, a learning environment is not merely about

academic performance; it is also about students' psychosocial lives. Thus, to summarize, the experience of blended learning during the pandemic on adolescents underscores a need to develop a more holistic approach to learning. This should combine device-based innovation with psychosocial support. Clearly, anxiety and emotional issues are not optional if we want to develop a more holistic approach to learning that supports both academic success and psychological well-being among future generations of students.

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