

Happiness and Life-Satisfaction Among College Students Who Attended Online Classes During COVID-19

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Due to the coronavirus pandemic, countries worldwide went under complete shutdown and implemented policies to shut down higher education institutions. As a consequence, college-going students experienced many challenges, especially with regard to transition and adaptation to online learning. The purpose of this paper is to understand the impact of online education, because of the covid pandemic, on students' wellbeing in the Indian context. In this mixed-methods study, college-going students (N=146) from India reported their perceived level of happiness and life satisfaction during online classes and their attitude towards online classes. A detailed descriptive analysis was adopted to understand the differences between the happiness and life satisfaction of respondents who preferred online classes to offline. Through the SPSS application, the Mann Whitney U Test was used to check for significant differences while comparing means of the groups who either answered 'Yes' or 'No' to the open-ended questionnaire. For this open-ended questionnaire, the authors used the standard significance level p-value of 0.05 or less for statistical analysis. The main themes that emerged from the study: pointed towards little to no difference in the happiness and life satisfaction of respondents in most aspects, hinted that existing mental health problems were exacerbated, and highlighted that the experience with online classes during COVID-19 greatly impacted the respondent's capacity to exert independence. Nonetheless, the overall perception of the respondents towards online classes ranged from mixed to mostly negative.

Keywords: College Students, COVID-19, Higher Education, Life Satisfaction, Happiness, Online Learning

Covid-19 was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and a pandemic on 11 March 2020 by the WHO. The virus spread quickly and infected 1.5 million people by just April. To slow down its transmission, countries around the world implemented social/physical distancing guidelines (World Health Organization, 2020), and promptly followed it up by implementing strict lockdowns that also extended to institutes of higher education. Even though social distancing policies have historically helped protect physical health worldwide, these policies have also greatly limited people's range of social interactions (Okabe-Miyamoto et al., 2021). Lockdowns across the globe, combined with social distancing led to millions of college and university attending students to adapt and shift to an online method of education. Vast numbers of students who were already enrolled

in colleges either graduated during the pandemic or spent over half of their college life attending virtual classes and exams. Moreover, many students started their college degrees online and have not yet seen their colleges in person or attended offline classes. This, combined with other socio-emotional, financial, economic, and cognitive factors, which have been hampered by the pandemic, has induced stress and anxiety among college-going students worldwide. While the online method of teaching and virtual classes has been the most common method of imparting education during the pandemic, the method comes with its difficulties, especially considering increasing social inequalities and in-equal access to higher education.

While not having to attend college offline has provided many students with the opportunity to develop their non-academic skills and take part in online internships and programs, the

lack of basic tools required for online education such as laptops, smartphones, and high-speed stable internet connections have proved to be a big hindrance in imparting and accessing higher education. Even after many months of online education, many people have found the transition from offline to online education to be challenging (Esani, 2010). A study conducted by Nambiar (2020) found that quality and timely interaction between student and professor, technical support availability, structured online class modules, and modifications to accommodate conduction of practical classes were all essential in student-teacher satisfaction regarding online education. But all these factors are not always present in online classes. Moreover, online classes also deprive students of chances for social interaction. The desire for interpersonal attachments is fundamental for human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and having frequent social interactions and spending more time talking with others are elements associated with greater well-being in individuals (Sun et al., 2019). But the advent of online education has robbed them of a chance of developing these essential interpersonal relationships. This period characterized by elements such as taking risks and exploring one's identity (Arnett, 2004) has been marred by a lack of social interactions and that in turn has consequences on the happiness of emerging adults who attend college.

Life satisfaction has been defined as an overall cognitive assessment of one's quality of life, or situation (Shin & Johnson, 1978). Greater levels of life satisfaction are related to high self-esteem, perceptions of having a good social support system, optimism, high levels of ego strength, self-efficacy, and having an internal locus of control (Bames, 1984; Bourland, et al., 2000; Cook et al., 2000; Judge et al., 1998). On the other hand, lower levels of life satisfaction have been related to depression, loneliness, anxiety, emotional distress, and social dysfunction (Bourland et al., 2000; Cook et al., 2000; Headey et al., 1993; Honkalampi et al., 1999; Schultz & Moore, 1984).

Happiness has been something that people have consistently sought since the start of their existence. Happiness is a worthwhile pursuit

because it functions as a resource that people unwittingly draw from in their endeavours toward higher levels of success, kindness, and health. Happiness is not just a reward, but it also brings about a myriad of individually and socially desirable outcomes (Diener et al., 2009). How does life satisfaction then hold with respect to online classes? Is there any difference in life satisfaction and happiness of students who prefer online classes and those who do not? Understanding this can help policymakers to design and implement policies that actively contribute toward the betterment of mental health and increase happiness and life satisfaction among college-going early adults. Education officers can undertake measures to ease online education and establish measures to reopen institutes. Moreover, for a much more dynamic education system that combines technology and modern interventions with traditional methods, students' well-being should take the centre stage.

Not many researches have been conducted to understand the effect of online classes on early adults attending institutes of higher education during COVID-19. This study is the first of its kind, especially in the Indian context where no prior research of this nature has been conducted. The results from this study can help in understanding the mindset of students towards online classes and act as a guide for future studies which have a focus on higher education as well as positive psychology in India. While the study has been conducted in India, its findings apply to the entire sub-continent and help in highlighting the state of individuals who access higher education through virtual mode across the globe. Strengthening of avenues directed towards psychological research into the early adulthood stage, especially in the context of life-altering events can be strengthened by studies like the current one and provide a catalytic push toward novel studies related to early adulthood.

Method

Sample

Evidence suggests that self-report measures of well-being possess satisfactory validity

Table 1. Participant Demographic Details

Participants Demographic Details (n=146)						
Gender	Male: 47% (n=68)			Female: 53% (n=78)		
Age	18-20 yrs.: 31	21-23 yrs.: 28	>23 yrs.: 9	18-20 yrs.: 49	21-23 yrs.: 22	>23 yrs.: 6
Course	Graduate: 52	Postgraduate: 15	Doctorate: 1	Graduate: 72	Postgraduate: 6	Doctorate: 0

and reliability to be employed in happiness research (Diener et al, 2009). Here, two self-report scales have been used to assess the happiness and life satisfaction of students who access higher education through online means. Happiness was measured through the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) while life satisfaction was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). The Subjective Happiness Scale is a four-item measure of global happiness where individuals respond to items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 is at the lower end of the scale and seven is at the higher end. Sample items include statements like: "I consider myself less happy/ happier" and "I am not a very happy person." The Satisfaction with Life Scale is a five-item measure of global life satisfaction where individuals respond to items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree." Sample items include statements like: "I am satisfied with my life" and "so far I have gotten the important things I want in life" (Yanez & Kelly, 2006). Both scales were introduced to college and university attending students in India along with an open-ended questionnaire that pivoted around online education. Measures on the open-ended questionnaire included items like, (1) how many hours of online classes do you attend per week (2) do you wish for classes to be offline forever (3) do you think you would enjoy life better if colleges will be reopened (4) would you feel happy if all classes go to offline mode (5) do you feel your life satisfaction has been negatively hampered due to online classes (6) have you ever attended offline college (7) have you struggled with the online mode of learning (8) have you experienced a lack of support from your professors or faculty?

Procedure

Between 27 December 2021 to 6 January 2022, one hundred and forty-seven participants in India completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Subjective Happiness Scale alongside survey items that focused on finer details of their online college experience. Participants who were missing items on the SWL or the SHS were removed. Hence, a total sample of 146 eligible participants was obtained, with the total number of men being n=68 and women, n=78. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their participation. There was no compensation involved.

Among these respondents, (n=125) were pursuing a bachelor's degree, while (n=19) were pursuing a master's degree, (n=1) respondent was pursuing a Ph.D., and (n=2) were preparing for a competitive exam. Total (n=81) respondents had attended offline college before while the remaining respondents, (n=65) had never attended offline classes. Out of the total respondents, 40.41% attended under 10 hours of online classes, 27.4% attended under 20 hours of online classes, 26.71% attended under 40 hours of online classes, while 5.48% of the total respondents attended under 60 hours of online classes.

Analysis

The study adopted a mixed-methods design. Open ended responses were analysed with a grounded theory approach utilising inductive analysis. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses was done by reading the responses of the participants and subsequently repetitive patterns and themes regarding the respondents' experiences were highlighted. These themes were used to understand the experience of the respondents. The answers on the open-ended questionnaire formed the basis of the coding scheme. The attitude of the respondents towards online classes was also analysed.

The coding scheme was then used to analyse the responses on the quantitative scale. These responses were categorised as grouping and testing variables after which the Mann Whitney U test was conducted. The differences in happiness and life-satisfaction of respondents who preferred online classes as opposed to offline and vice-versa were then analysed.

Results

Reliability

A three-part questionnaire was sent to 146 college students. The satisfaction with life scale consisted of 5 items ($\alpha = .77$), the subjective happiness scale consisted of 4 items ($\alpha = .797$), and the college experience questionnaire consisted of 9 items. Here, both the scales have $\alpha > 0.70$. Hence, the data collected is internally consistent and reliable.

Quantitative

Several themes were observed among college students' open-ended responses, which indicated a preference for both online as well as offline classes and means of education, considering COVID-19. These themes were strengthened by the responses on the Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Subjective Happiness Scale.

Table 2. Responses on the open-ended scale.

Metrics	No	Yes
Do you think that you would enjoy life in a better way if colleges were reopened?	22	124
Would you feel happier if all classes go offline?	31	115
Do you feel that your life satisfaction has been negatively hampered due to online classes?	46	100
Would you say you do not feel as happy as you thought you would during this time?	29	117
Have you ever attended offline college?	65	81
Have you struggled with online mode of learning?	30	116
Do you feel lack of support from your college faculty/professors?	49	97
Do you wish that classes would be offline forever?	43	103

Mann Whitney U test was used to evaluate the difference between life satisfaction and subjective happiness of respondents.

Following questions were asked and the responses analysed for finding the difference in satisfaction with life.

Table 3. Responses on the Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Subjective Happiness Scale.

Metrics	SWL and SH Medians			
	Satisfaction with life Scale		Subjective Happiness Scale	
Do you think that you would enjoy life in a better way if colleges were reopened?	Yes: 21	No: 21.5	Yes: 4.5	No: 4.25
Would you feel happier if all classes go offline?	Yes: 21	No: 21	Yes: 4.5	No: 4.5
Do you feel that your life satisfaction has been negatively hampered due to online classes?	Yes: 20	No: 23	Yes: 4.375	No: 4.75
Would you say you do not feel as happy as you thought you would during this time?	Yes: 21	No: 24	Yes: 4.25	No: 5
Have you ever attended offline college?	Yes: 22	No: 20	Yes: 4.5	No: 4.25
Have you struggled with online mode of learning?	Yes: 21	No: 21.5	Yes: 4.5	No: 4.62
Do you feel lack of support from your college faculty/professors?	Yes: 20	No: 22	Yes: 4.25	No: 4.75
Do you wish that classes would be offline forever?	Yes: 20	No: 22	Yes: 4.5	No: 4.5

Table 4 . Mann Whitney U test

SWL and SH: Mann Whitney U Test								
Metrics	Satisfaction With Life Scale				Subjective Happiness Scale			
	Z	P	U	r ²	Z	P	U	r ²
Do you think that you would enjoy life in a better way if colleges were reopened?	0.23	0.81	1320	0.019	0.32	0.74	1304	0.027
Would you feel happier if all classes go offline?	0.38	0.69	1701	0.032	0.41	0.96	1774	0.033
Do you feel that your life satisfaction has been negatively hampered due to online classes?	2.42	0.01	1724	0.200	2.25	0.02	1766	0.186
Would you say you do not feel as happy as you thought you would during this time?	3.41	0.00	1002	0.282	3.15	0.00	1054	0.261
Have you ever attended offline college?	1.62	0.10	2219	0.134	0.98	0.32	2383	0.081
Have you struggled with online mode of learning?	0.672	0.502	1601	0.0556	1.68	0.09	1393	0.139
Do you feel lack of support from your college faculty/professors?	1.471	0.141	2022	0.1217	1.39	0.16	2040	0.115
Do you wish that classes would be offline forever?	1.249	0.212	1924	0.1033	0.20	0.83	2166	0.017

‘Do you think that you would enjoy life in a better way if colleges were reopened (p= 0.812)?

Would you feel happier if all classes go offline (p=0.698)?

Have you ever attended offline college (p= 0.103)?

Have you struggled with online mode of learning (p=0.502)?

Have you experienced a lack of support from college professors/faculty during the online mode of learning (p=0.141)?

Do you wish that classes would be offline forever (p=0.212)?

Since, ‘p’ is greater than the confidence level $\alpha = .05$ in questions 1-6, the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, it can be concluded that there is no difference between the satisfaction with life of people who answered either ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ in questions 1 to 6.

Further questions were asked:

Do you feel that your life satisfaction has been negatively hampered due to online classes, (p=0.015)?

Would you say you do not feel as happy as you thought you would during this time, (p=0.001)?

Since ‘p’ is lesser than the confidence level $\alpha = .05$ for both the questions, the null hypothesis is accepted, revealing that the subjective happiness of respondents who said ‘No’ was higher than respondents who said ‘Yes’.

Further, for question 1, effect size is ‘r = 0.200’ and for question 2, effect size ‘r =0.282’ was found. For both questions the effect size is small.

In order to understand the difference between subjective happiness of respondents following questions were asked:

Do you think that you would enjoy life in a better way if colleges were reopened (p=0.742)?

Would you feel happier if all classes go offline (p=0.967)?

Have you ever attended offline college (p= 0.325)?

Have you struggled with online mode of learning (p=0.092)?

Have you experienced a lack of support from college professors/faculty during the online mode of learning ($p=0.163$)?

Do you wish that classes would be offline forever? ($p=0.835$)?

The p is greater than the confidence level $\alpha = .05$ satisfaction with life of questions 1-6. The rejection of null hypothesis indicates that there is no difference between the satisfaction with life of people who answered either <Yes> or <No>.

Further questions were asked in order to assess the difference between subjective happiness of respondents. They are:

Do you feel that your life satisfaction has been negatively hampered due to online classes, ($p=0.025$)?

Would you say you do not feel as happy as you thought you would during this time, ($p=0.002$)?

Since ' p ' is lesser than the confidence level $\alpha = .05$ for both the questions, the null hypothesis is accepted, revealing that the subjective happiness of respondents who said 'No' was higher than respondents who said 'Yes'.

Further, for question 7, effect size ' $r = 0.186$ ' and for question 8, effect size ' $r = 0.261$ ' was found. For both questions the effect size is small.

Qualitative

To assess the attitude towards the mode of college education(online/offline) and how it affected satisfaction with life as well as subjective happiness, open-ended questions were asked.

The transition from offline college to online college was described by respondents as being "tiresome", "hectic", "shaky", "challenging", "distracting" and "weird." Respondents also pointed towards finding themselves to be unable to pay attention and found that lack of focus was consistent during online education. Moreover, students felt impacted by socio-economic differences and described the online mode of education as, "an uneven playing field." Similarly, students from rural areas and belonging to marginal backgrounds found themselves to be struggling in terms of both education and mental health.

Respondents found themselves to be "procrastinating" and found online classes to be "confining." Respondents also described online classes as "monotonous" and "boring." Respondents pointed to the impact on their mental health and respondent reported their ADHD had become more severe than before. Respondents also described online classes to be bad for their mental health and noted that online classes were "plummeting their mental health" and that online classes were "jarring, laidback, dull and depressing." One respondent reported that their "personal space feels invaded at most times." Respondents noted that "online classes were thrilling at first, but quickly became tiresome." Respondents also use the words "struggle", "unprecedented", "unbearable", "tedious" and "not good" when asked to describe the transition from online to offline classes. Another respondent said that there was only a "pretence of productivity" now.

There were other respondents who used the words, "interesting", "fun", and "rapid" to describe the transition from offline to online mode of learning. A respondent described the transition to be "smooth as butter." Another respondent referred to it as a "really innovative step" and a "helpful measure." A respondent reported feeling "ease in communication" online due to his introverted nature but pointed out that learning during online classes was "tough." Another respondent was thankful for "the lack of anxiety" and said that it "made it easier at times to voice opinions in classroom and discussions." "Better time management" and "more time for learning" was experienced by some respondents. Another respondent described the transition as "better in terms of learning." A respondent reported feeling that "the transition was quite difficult at first", but they now feel "quite adapted to the system." Respondents who had not attended online classes ever described their situation "as the new normal" and referred to their situation as "dreadful and terrible."

Respondents were asked whether their outlook towards their life was positively or negatively influenced during online classes. Most respondents reported to have felt a negative influence on their lives due to online classes. Some of these respondents had previously

attended offline college, while others had not. "Lack of attention", "difficulty coping", and "bad effect on physical and mental health", were some of the reasons behind the negative influence. A few respondents said that while the effect was neutral at first, it slowly became negative. There were many respondents, however, who felt that the effect of online classes on their outlook on life was positive. They attributed this to the fact that they could spend more time with their families, and they did not have to face much social anxiety.

Discussion

Prior cross-sectional studies have provided valuable information about the prevalence of mental health problems in emerging adults (Van den Berg et al., 2021). However, they have not indicated if there is any influence of online education on the happiness and life satisfaction of the students. This study is among the first in India to investigate the potential differences in happiness and life satisfaction of students attending online classes during COVID-19. First, differences in happiness and life satisfaction between students who preferred online, or offline classes were explored. Second, we examined what the attitude of these students was regarding online classes, irrespective of differences in perceived happiness and life satisfaction, and analysed the themes that emerged from their responses. The study found that there were insignificant differences in satisfaction with life and subjective happiness levels between respondents who wanted offline college and respondents who wished for online college, on most but not all fronts. Similarly, there were no significant differences between respondents who thought they would enjoy life better if colleges were open and respondents who thought that they would not enjoy life better if colleges were open. Respondents who had previously attended offline college did not have any significant differences in satisfaction with life or subjective happiness, as opposed to those respondents who were yet to attend offline college. Respondents who did not report having struggled with the online mode of learning did not have any significant differences in satisfaction with life or subjective happiness in comparison to the respondents who said that they did struggle

with the online mode of learning. Similarly, respondents who reported having experienced a lack of support from their college professors or faculty did not have any significant differences in satisfaction with life or subjective happiness as opposed to the respondents who did not report having experienced a lack of support. On the other hand, respondents who reported that their satisfaction with life was negatively hampered were found to have lower levels of satisfaction with life as well as subjective happiness, as opposed to those respondents who reported that their satisfaction with life was not negatively hampered.

It was also found that respondents who reported that they were not as happy as they thought they would have been during this time, had lower levels of life satisfaction as well as subjective happiness. While the respondents who reported the opposite were found to have more satisfaction with life, as well as subjective happiness. Thematic analysis of the qualitative responses revealed consistent themes of hopelessness, disappointment, dissatisfaction, and anger. Other themes that were persistent throughout the responses included lack of social connection and impairment of mental and physical health. Social anxiety both increased and decreased for respondents. This was heavily based on whether they are of introverted or extroverted nature. Erikson, 1950 placed a great emphasis on social interaction during emerging adulthood but during the online mode of education themes of social withdrawal and aloofness were observed. Emerging adults who were already facing some sort of mental distress before the pandemic saw an increase in distress during online classes. This is consistent with prior research that points toward emerging adults who already experienced distress before the pandemic, experiencing more distress during the lockdown (Van den Berg, et.al., 2021). In our data, online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic did not necessarily result in a significant decline in subjective happiness and satisfaction with life, but long-term exposure to online classes caused pre-existing mental health issues to worsen and a consistently negative attitude regarding online classes was developed.

Research limitations

The assessments of this study were brief and did not go into in-depth details regarding the COVID experience in relation to online classes. Moreover, other variables like family setup, mental health conditions, friend and peer groups, relationship or marital status, family income, parental influence, etc., were not analysed. The study was concentrated on students who are pursuing their bachelor's and the sample size of 146 is small, which limits generalizability. Future studies should keep these variables in mind.

Conclusion

The study contributes to our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on emerging adults, especially in regard to their positive psychology during higher education. The participants indicated that online classes were especially difficult and frustrating for them. This period marked by adventure and exploration (Arnett, 2004) was converted into a period of constraints and limitations. The subjective happiness and satisfaction with life of respondents who preferred online classes were not much different from those who preferred offline classes but most respondents, regardless of their preference reported feeling that their growth was hampered and their independence was constrained.

While mixed themes emerged with perception to online classes, most respondents perceived online classes during COVID-19 in a negative light. The experiences of the respondents pointed towards varying degrees of disruption in their lives due to COVID-19. The difference in the amount of impact that COVID-19 had on online educational experience in emerging adults over attending college confirmed prior research that shows that pandemic may affect everybody, but not necessarily to an equal degree (Van den Berg, et.al., 2021). These differences were especially true for respondents coming from weaker socio-economic sectors.

Moreover, the respondents experience confirms that mental health issues among emerging adults have been accelerated due to online education during COVID-19.

Finally, the study agrees with prior research that shows a limitation in social contact of

emerging adults limits their opportunities for personal and professional growth as well as independence (Van den Berg, et.al., 2021).

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