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Mitigating loneliness and remediating solitude: pandemic narratives from the Global South

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ABSTRACT

Set in the Global South context of India, this article examines how users of digital media used their platforms and devices to mitigate loneliness and create moments of solitude during the Covid-19 pandemic. Historically, experiencing loneliness has been understood as debilitating but solitude has been deemed necessary for individuality and achieving self-growth. This study, qualitative in nature, examines how users of digital media distinguished between the two and charts this engagement to examine their capabilities while using their platforms and services of choice. By adopting a longitudinal design of iterative interviews with 10 participants across age groups and demographics, our findings indicate that digital media users in the Global South repurposed their platforms and services in many ways during the pandemic but found little meaning in their online interactions. The participants, while critically reflecting on their online practices, found social media isolating, and digital media's attempts at remediating solitude suspect.

Introduction

In November 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared loneliness a 'pressing health threat' and launched a commission to foster social cohesion (WHO, 2023), a move that extended the US Surgeon General Dr Vivek Murthy's call from May 2023 where he categorized loneliness and isolation as an epidemic and 'an underappreciated public health crisis' (HHS, 2023). Defining loneliness as 'the social pain of not feeling connected' (2023), WHO linked it to 'social isolation' which it called 'having an insufficient number of social connections' (WHO, 2023). Existing research indicates that both are significant challenges in the case of older adults (Donovan & Blazer, 2020) and WHO estimates that one in four older people across regions and geographical realities today experience social isolation (WHO, 2023). Amongst younger sections of the global population, the organization estimates that 5–15% of adolescents experience loneliness – a

number that it believes falls short of reality. WHO's estimates are supported by other recent research on loneliness suggesting a similar 'problematic' trend on a global scale and an overwhelming experience of loneliness across age groups and contexts (Surkalim et al., 2022). Surkalim et al.'s findings from meta-analyses of data from 113 countries/territories identify both a dearth of global data on the matter and the prevalence of loneliness across countries in a 'highly heterogenous' manner (2022). Their findings advocate for better awareness of widespread loneliness among health professionals, decision makers, and the broader public (Surkalim et al., 2022). Additionally, Bound Alberti (2018) calls loneliness the 'modern epidemic' and while arguing for it to be understood as an 'emotion cluster', identifies it as one of the most neglected aspects of emotion history and argues that loneliness today is 'inevitable, negative, and universal' (p. 252).

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers have observed how sections of the population now have an empathetic understanding of various aspects of loneliness due to physical/social distancing and the enforcement of lockdowns. Bundy et al. (2021), in their study of already-isolated older interviewees, observe how their loneliness didn't compound during the pandemic but 'carried a new valence for interviewees' (p. 870). Similarly, O'Sullivan et al. (2021) note how the moment has allowed people to comprehend what it means to be socially isolated, lonely, or both. Neves et al. (2023) in their examination of lived experiences among older adults find that loneliness is defined by their participants as: 'a detrimental absence of companionship and meaningful social interactions' (p. 120). They observe that living conditions in the pandemic have disrupted existing systems of managing loneliness and necessitated the remediation of response approaches through digital technology.

In the context of digital and new media research, loneliness has been an area of sustained interest as scholars like Sherry Turkle (in her book Alone Together) (2011) have complicated the idea of loneliness in the digital age by calling users of digital media 'cyborgs' – not in the revolutionary, liberatory sense espoused by Haraway in her manifesto (2013) but as restricted individuals that have been prepared for 'relationships with less' (p. 154) by a network that requires 'unsettling isolations of the tethered self' (p. 154) where the self can absent itself from its physical surroundings and experience the physical and virtual simultaneously through multitasking and making more time in the constant juggling required in contemporary life (p. 154–155). In terms of social media platforms and their potential as technologies that enable connection and the forging of networks (Baym, 2015; Castells & Cardoso, 2005), existing research highlights their use to reconnect (Nowland et al., 2018), to tackle loneliness – image-based platforms like Snapchat and Instagram have been found to 'confer to their users a significant decrease in self-reported loneliness' (Pittman & Reich, 2016, p. 157) – and, in the context of older people, to further 'bonding social capital' by interacting through platforms like WhatsApp and other digital media services (Simons et al., 2023, p. 152).

Loneliness and solitude in the digital age

As Turkle's observations about 'isolations of the tethered self' suggest, there is a need for us as researchers to not just engage with loneliness in the digital context but also interrogate our understanding of solitude in a similar frame (Turkle, 2011). There is a need to create room for both ideas as we chart and derive meanings from the myriad interactions

that users of digital media perform in their everyday. A distinction between loneliness and solitude can be drawn by not merely looking at how the terms are defined but also how they have been historically experienced: loneliness, as literature highlights, often can be a debilitating experience (Donovan & Blazer, 2020; WHO, 2023), while solitude, on the other hand is considered to be beneficial for the person experiencing it (Long & Averill, 2003; Storr, 2005). Defining solitude is challenging despite its popularity as a theme in academic and mainstream literature. William Wordsworth refers to the 'bliss of solitude' in his iconic poem on daffodils (Wordsworth, 1804/1967), while Emerson's essays on society and solitude force us to rethink our understandings of domestic life and what it means to lead a complete, authentic life (Emerson, 1870/2007). He observes that experiencing solitude is necessary for one's ability to cultivate individuality, achieve self-reliance and self-growth because it offers not only an escape from the demands and pressures of society but also room for introspection, reflection, newer perspectives, and creativity (Emerson, 1870/2007). His student, Thoreau lays claim to what is perhaps the most celebrated argument for solitude when he writes

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately … and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived … I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life (Thoreau, 1910, p. 118)

His argument for taking refuge in nature finds echoes in India from the poet Rabindranath Tagore who describes his experience of solitude in his letters to his niece as a solitary resident on a houseboat, surveying his family's properties in various parts of Bengal. He writes: 'The sun's heat, the silence, the solitude, the call of birds, especially the crow, and the long, beautiful leisure – all of it entangled together makes me very detached and yet emotional' (Chaudhuri, 2015, p. 232). Similarly, Robert Putnam's seminal work (2000) on bowling alone in 90s USA also identifies the significant role played by solitude in leisure time activities. Putnam highlights members of society choosing to step away from activities with social consequence to perform trivial acts like bowling alone. In mainstream writing, Olivia Laing (2016) also identifies the possibilities that solitude offers when they encounter the city of New York after breaking up with a partner, having relocated to the city in order to be with the partner in the first place. Laing's book, a meditation on loneliness – how it is experienced, captured, enforced, and mitigated also highlights the redeeming qualities of retreat from society despite it being involuntary, unlike Emerson's prescription.

The understanding of solitude in the context of the digital has been varied. While some scholars have argued that the internet has signaled the end of solitude (Deresiewicz, 2009), others, especially from disciplines like game studies, have championed the possibilities of immersion and flow that digital/new media technologies offer (Calleja, 2011). As Turkle's phrasing suggests, the understanding of solitude in the lives of the 'always on' (Boyd, 2012), engaged digital media user needs nuance especially when we consider that solitude at times would need to be established unconventionally i.e., not only from the very devices and networks that enable the multitasking that Turkle identifies but also a solitude that is enabled by them through their functionalities. Research on the ideas of digital detox (Radtke et al., 2022; Syvertsen, 2020; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020) and digital exhaustion have argued for the necessity of switching off and tuning out networked technologies and devices for user wellbeing (Nguyen et al., 2022). However, there is little

research on and understanding of these ideas in Global South contexts, especially in countries like India where existing research has indicated that major sections of the connected publics face not only challenges of connectivity and access like the digital divide (Selwyn, 2004) but are also vulnerable and unprepared to face the various encounters that digitality throws at them (Arora, 2019; Shah, 2015). This categorization of a major chunk of the world's population and its journey with digitality as a homogenous mass is problematic and recent research has begun to challenge this typecasting. We operationalize our definition of loneliness for this study by borrowing from Neves et al.'s (2023) understanding ('a detrimental absence of companionship and meaningful social interactions') and applying it to the Indian context. Similarly, we operationalize solitude by drawing from the understandings of Emerson as a positive experience essential for self-growth.

The need for a Global South perspective

While researchers from India like Sarwatay and Raman have found nuance in the ways young people use social media platforms in their everyday lives, (Sarwatay & Raman, 2021) others have charted ways in which digital media users in these contexts have found ways to not just overcome challenges (Varanasi et al., 2021) but also create new capabilities to mitigate the adverse effects of mis/dis-information (Deshbandhu & Sahni, 2023). However, a common strand in the findings of most of these studies is a lack of user awareness and digital media literacy (Sarwatay et al., 2021).

This study, from the Indian context, uses experiencing loneliness and the ability to create moments of solitude in the everyday as a means to understand users' ability to harness and repurpose the possibilities offered to them by new media technologies. It looks at the journeys of 10 participants through the Covid-19 pandemic in India (2020-22) and seeks to understand how they experienced loneliness and solitude during the unique temporal and spatial constraints of the time. It explores the various ways in which they relied on digital media interactions in the everyday to try and mitigate the loneliness they experienced, while also relying on the same devices and services to try and create opportune moments of solitude to overcome the challenges they faced. This study, qualitative in nature, offers not just grounded understandings of what loneliness and solitude mean to its 10 participants in their lived realities but also highlights what users of digital and social media from India and its many regions have begun to expect from their interactions with online platforms. The continuum of loneliness and solitude proposed here is used to not just chart how the participants distinguished between the two but also as a framework to examine their capabilities while using their platforms and services of choice and as a means to elicit critical reflections on the various acts they performed online at the time. This longitudinal study, qualitative in nature, addresses the dearth of longitudinal research on loneliness from the Global South while also exploring how digital media practices from the region shape people's understandings of loneliness and solitude.

Method

In-depth interviews were chosen for this study because it was imperative for the researchers to gain insights into how the participants understood and constructed their personal

perspectives on loneliness and solitude while getting them to reflect on their digital engagements and approaches to digital leisure. The study, initially conceptualized in 2020 with a simple exploratory cross-sectional research design (Cummings, 2018; Lebo & Weber, 2015; Spector, 2019), hoped to examine reflective conversations with a variety of digital media users in India. However, the study had to be reshaped into a longitudinal journey with iterative interviews owing to the overwhelmingly techno-utopian (Dickel & Schrape, 2017; Segal, 2005) and deterministic nature (Dafoe, 2015; Wyatt, 2008) of responses elicited in the early interviews in 2020. The researchers revisited the study's research design and formulated an iterative 'once-a-year approach', where they could speak with participants and get them to reflect on their digital leisure practices alongside the pandemic's progression. This revised approach meant that the 10 participants were interviewed thrice over the three-year long study and each in-depth interview lasted about 80-90 minutes. The interview guide used to facilitate the conversations (see appendix 1) consisted of five broad lines of questions with several sub-questions designed by engaging with existing literature in the domain and in line with the emergent research and news from India context during the pandemic. The same guide was used throughout the study to observe how the participants' responses changed as the pandemic progressed. The 30 in-depth interviews offered the researchers over 40 hours of interview data in total to analyze. Owing to the restrictions on social mobility and the national advisory on social distancing at the time, all the interviews in the study were conducted online. Adopting the revised approach helped chart how people's perceptions of technology changed in the constantly evolving realities of surviving a generational pandemic while coming to terms with what such an existence demanded of their online and offline lives.

The original participant pool for the study was built by initially recruiting two participants using a call for recruitment on social media networks that specifically invited participants willing to talk about loneliness during the Covid-19 pandemic in India. The first two respondents to the call were interviewed and used as points of origin for two parallel snowballs where the participants introduced us to people in their social circles (in-person/offline) who were facing similar challenges or difficulties with loneliness at the time. Each researcher followed one snowball's motion to try and assimilate a diverse group of participants in terms of age, gender, demographics, and lived realities in a bid to examine as many contextual and lived realities as possible. The snowball technique seemed suitable because it natively allowed the researchers to choose participants who met the criteria of the study and then helped identify potential participants from the networks and social circles of selected participants. The snowball model also ensured that most of the original set of participants were retained once the study was reconceptualized to its longer iterative format as trust had been established with them through the process of building the participant pool and the initial in-depth interviews. One participant chose to step away from the study when they realized the study's structure was updated – their insights and reflections have accordingly been eliminated from the responses. The data gathered from the interviews consisted both of responses to questions from an interview guide prepared by the researchers (see Appendix 1), and reflections, personal accounts, and details of the participants' living conditions during the pandemic, the challenges they faced, and the losses they experienced during the time. All these served as potential entry points into examining how their personal interpretations of loneliness and solitude were

understood, negotiated, mitigated, and created to enable routines and practices of learning, work, leisure, and socializing. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the difficult living realities of the time, and the time and effort required to build the requisite trust with participants to create safe spaces for discussion and make them feel comfortable discussing their negotiations with loneliness and solitude, the number of participants in the study had to be limited. The researchers were also aware that due to the longitudinal design of the study, participants' responses would evolve over time and thus recruitment of participants was stopped when redundancy in nature of responses emerged. We relied on gathering thick, contextually rich data from each of our participants and their lives to provide slices of meaning and diversity. The 10 participants chosen here are from various regions, economic and linguistic backgrounds, and classes of India's 'networked society.'

Due to the study's exploratory nature and the unique temporal reality of the period in which it was conducted, a grounded theory approach was used to analyze interview data. Data were sorted using open coding to identify three broad themes, followed by axial coding to identify more focused patterns under the broad themes, and then specific coding to identify unique instances that exemplified the broad themes and were exceptional (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The data analysis was jointly conducted by both researchers and the themes were subsequently developed through careful deliberation and discussion. Inter coder reliability was achieved at each stage of the analysis process through continuous discussion (Carey et al., 1996). The specific themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data can be seen in Table 2.

List of participants

A list of the 10 participants that were part of the three-year long study is presented in Table 1.

Analysis

A list of emergent themes and sub-themes from data analysis through the coding process is presented in Table 2.

Digital dependencies: movement, navigation, and coming to terms with the pandemic

The first analytical section of this article charts the journeys, relocations, and adjustments that the study's participants had to make once the global pandemic was declared and restrictions were affected by the Indian government. For context, mainstream international media considered India's restrictions and lockdowns some of the most stringent taken by a country (Roy et al., 2022) and several studies have detailed challenges faced by the country's several publics (Deshbandhu & Sahni, 2023; Venkataraman & Venkataraman, 2021). Thus, it was imperative for us as researchers to chart the challenges faced by the participants during both the pandemic and the travel they had to undergo to remain safe. Almost all of our 10 participants traveled during the pandemic, relocating owing either to the demands of the institutions they were part of, or the restrictions in place. For example, Shilpa, a student at a college in Central India, had to relocate to a town

Table 1. A list of participants and their digital media preferences at the time of the study.

S.No.	Name of Participant	Gender and Age markers	Places of Residence during the pandemic	Number of digital devices in everyday use	Popular platforms, services, and applications used daily	Apps and networking platforms used to connect with friends, family, and others
1	Aarti	Female, early 30s	Hyderabad and Midnapore	3 (mobile phone, iPad, and PC)	Netflix, Prime Video, (video – huge fan of k-dramas) Spotify(music), Goodreads and Lithium (for eBooks)	Instagram and WhatsApp
2	Akriti	Female, late 50s	Indore	1 (Mobile)	Netflix, YouTube, Prime Video (Video content)	WhatsApp Instagram, FB Messenger
3	Harshitha	Female, early 20s	Kanpur, Colombo (SL), Kozhikode, and Pune	4 (mobile phone, laptop, iPad, and Kindle)	Spotify (music), Apple podcasts (audio), Goodreads, iBooks and Calibre (eBooks), Netflix, Prime Video, Disney + Hotstar, YouTube (video content)	Instagram, Pinterest, WhatsApp, and personal emails
4	Kalyani	Female, early 20s	Kannur, Bengaluru	6 (3 phones, 2 laptops, and a design tablet)	Voicenotes (daily journals), lots of chatting, play Fortnite, watch Netflix and have YouTube premium but rarely use it.	Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Twitter (now X) and FB messenger
5	Madhavi	Female, early 30s	Noida, National Capital Region	2 (mobile phone and Laptop)	Spotify (Music), Netflix, Prime Video, Disney + Hotstar YouTube	Instagram WhatsApp, Email, FB Messenger, and LinkedIn
6	Praneeth	Male, late 20s	Hyderabad	3 (mobile phone, tablet, and PC)	Games, lots of them – Among Us, Suspects, FIFA, Marvel Snap, For video content: Netflix, Prime Video, Disney + Hotstar, and YouTube	Instagram, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn
7	Satish	Male, early 50s	Indore	2 (Mobile and Laptop)	YouTube and Netflix (video) and Spotify (music)	Instagram WhatsApp Email Twitter FB Messenger LinkedIn
8	Shilpa	Female, early 20s	Pune, Indore, Mumbai, and Ranchi	2 (mobile phone, and PC)	Phone center of the universe, laptop for work and nothing else. Netflix, Spotify (music), a lot of mobile games, even game while on the phone. Cult Fit for fitness. Goodreads for books.	Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter (now X), Snapchat, Pinterest, Tumblr, and LinkedIn
9	Seema	Female, early 40s	Philadelphia and Bengaluru	2 (mobile phone, and laptop)	Cult fit for fitness. Access to most streaming platforms like Netflix, Disney + Hotstar, and Prime Video. Engages with a lot of video and broadcast content.	WhatsApp, and texting
10	Tarun	Male, late 20s	Hyderabad	3 (phone, iPad, and PC)	Spotify (music), Netflix, Prime Video, Disney + Hotstar, and YouTube for video	WhatsApp, Instagram, LinkedIn, and forums on Facebook

Table 2. A list of emergent themes and sub-themes from data analysis through the coding process.

Type of Coding	Type of theme & Description
Open Coding	Broad Theme: Challenges of performing everyday tasks of learning, living, and leisure digitally, finding suitable platforms, apps, and services
Open Coding	Broad Theme: Moving places, living arrangements, constraints of space, and boundaries
Open Coding	Broad Theme: Significant amounts of screen time and challenges with work/life balance
Open Coding	Broad Theme: Surrounded by people and family but feeling lonely and unrelatable
Open Coding	Broad Theme: Repurposing technology and digital media services to mitigate loneliness and solitude
Open Coding	Broad Theme: Loss of privacy, sense of 'my' things – time, space, activities – a sense of self, solitude created through headphones, noise cancelling?
Axial Coding	Sub Theme: Fear of missing out on things and making sure to always be available
Axial Coding	Sub Theme: Leisure, entertainment across apps, devices, and services – juggling digital demands
Axial Coding	Sub Thene: Physical ailments and vision impairment
Axial Coding	Sub Theme: Problems of connectivity, access, digital divide, and the loss of being left out when disconnected
Axial Coding	Sub Theme: The demands of platforms and applications – labor, performance, exhaustion
Axial Coding	Sub Theme: Ineffectiveness of social media platforms to mitigate loneliness – always online but to do what?
Axial Coding	Sub Theme: Finding ways to balance online and offline – performing non digital tasks, stepping out of the digital everyday
Axial Coding	Sub Theme: Critical perspectives on wellbeing mode, focus mode, screen time assessments on phones, surveillance and beyond.
Specific Coding	Unique instances and special circumstances presented as is because they couldn't be grouped thematically.

in Maharashtra (Western India) during the pandemic. She returned to her college in early 2021 only to be then sent back to her home in early April 2021 when the second wave peaked. She returned again later in the year. She then relocated to Mumbai (in Western India) for work from where she was reassigned to Ranchi (Eastern India). Similar relocation challenges were also faced by Aarti who was residing in Hyderabad and working at an educational institution when the first wave struck in 2020. When her workplace asked her to teach online, she had to relocate to her hometown of Midnapore in West Bengal (Eastern India) to be with her parents and aging grandparents.

Traversing large distances across the country seems to have been the norm for the younger section of participants in the study as Kalyani also relocated from her college to her home in Kerala (Southern India). She went back for her convocation and subsequently moved to Bengaluru (in Karnataka) for work. Another participant, Harshitha, had to move to Colombo (Sri Lanka) during the period while continuing her postgraduate degree online for a year before she moved to Pune (Maharashtra) for her summer internship, and then to Kozhikode in-person for her second year. Seema, one of the middle-aged participants in the study, like Harshitha, traveled countries in the period, shuttling between Bengaluru and Philadelphia (United States) for six-month periods as she cared for her aging mother and pursued her academic responsibilities in the US. The older participants, on the other hand, mentioned that during the period their residences became homes for younger members of their families. For example, Akriti, who is in her late fifties and generally lives with her daughter, also had to make room for her son and his wife during the pandemic. In this unsettled period of constant relocation, our data suggests that notions of personal space were continuously challenged and reconfigured, thereby also challenging existing understandings of terms like loneliness and solitude. As our participants arrived at contextual and personal understandings of the terms while reflecting on the possibilities offered by digital interactions, it was

increasingly apparent that the idea of 'technologies of life' (Cruz & Harindranath, 2020; Deshbandhu, 2024; Deshbandhu & Sahni, 2023) cannot just be restricted to platforms like WhatsApp. There is a need for a more nuanced understanding of how users of digital technologies in parts of the Global South like India forged reliance and carved dependencies for specific facets of their everyday lives. The following analytical sections discuss this in greater detail.

Zoom, meet, Instagram, and social media: the pressure to be 'always on'

Reflecting on their everyday lives during the various stages of the pandemic, most of the participants, across ages recalled relying on a variety of video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Google's Meet, and Microsoft's Teams as well as dedicated applications for group video calls like Houseparty and IMO. While the functional need to use such platforms to communicate, stay in touch, or perform social acts is self-explanatory, what stood out was the different ways in which our participants came to terms with the expectations of such platforms. Shilpa talked about her college classes on Zoom and how the etiquette for attending them required an on camera and a muted microphone. 'It was a way to show that I was present and part of the class while also ensuring that I didn't add unintended noise to the conversation.' Shilpa's reflection, while not necessarily unique with regards the standard 'netiquette' prevalent during the period, was mirrored by most participants who felt that performing work related activities during the day on such platforms was a major source of curiosity and intrigue for the people with whom they were sharing their living spaces. Kalyani indicated how her parents were always worried about her odd hours of logging into platforms like Zoom and Meet and the prolonged time she spent online to attend classes and participate in learning activities. Aarti encountered a similar set of reactions from the people in her household as they were curious to see what was happening in the classes she was teaching and what the students were like. The study's male participants struggled too, as Tarun emphasized how he had to tell his parents precise times when he would be in meetings so that he wasn't interrupted. However, most participants here distinguished between platforms that were meant for formal/official day-to-day operations and others that were deemed more suitable for informal conversation. Tarun and Praneeth, for example, were vehement when they stated that they would try their best to avoid a platform like Zoom to speak with friends.

What stood out in our analysis of the longitudinal data was how, with time, the participants became aware of the demands of such platforms and began to note that while the purposes for which the platforms were being used were different, their demands of them as users and 'attendees' (for the lack of a better term) were common. Kalyani spoke about her difficulties in balancing the demands of platforms like Zoom in the early days of the pandemic:

> I was constantly online when I was home at the time of the pandemic. This meant nearly 24 hours a day on platforms like Zoom or Meet. I was always online because I was anxious about missing out on things that my friends or classmates were doing and was soon constantly online. However, nearly two months in, I realized I needed to stop because I was worried about impairing my eyesight. However, it was easier said than done – my entire day was online, and it was challenging to find things to do offline.

Balancing screentime and the demands of networking applications was a challenge for several participants. For example, Madhavi felt that prolonged online time aggravated pain in her neck and certain parts of the back. She also observed the demands of staying online among young people in her vicinity and reflected in her interview – 'These devices exert a lot of strain on the eyes and my young nephew was prescribed the use of spectacles at the time. It was a unique time: the young and old alike were online and on their devices all the time.'

Similar observations to Madhavi's were also made by Harshitha, Shilpa, and Praneeth who saw the sudden spike in their screen times but found it very difficult to escape the demands of their networks and platforms. Tarun noted how at the time he was scheduling and getting on a variety of group calls every evening with different sections of his social circle to try and not feel lonely and alone. Praneeth, for his part, relied on video games like *Suspects* and *Among Us* at the time to try and stay connected with his friends while also using social media apps like Instagram and WhatsApp. He observed:

> I had suddenly lost the ability to step out of my home and even though I live in a large joint family setup, my family members aren't people I can talk to about everything in my life. I missed going on walks in the evening, playing football, heading out for a meal with friends. All of this had to now be done digitally. For months I would keep chatting through the day on WhatsApp and Instagram and then tune into play *Suspects* and *Among Us* with my friends in the evening. I needed that time to be myself, to be with people who got parts of me my family didn't.

Praneeth's desire to speak with people he could relate to was also felt by Satish who felt lonely because there were certain aspects of his life he couldn't share with his family. He pointed out explicitly that loneliness here wasn't the absence of people but an inability to be with people who could relate and empathize. A corollary to Tarun, Praneeth, and Satish's experiences was Madhavi's unique case of developing a dependence on her mobile phone. She found at the time that almost everybody in her vicinity and social circles was dependent on a gamut of devices in their day-to-day and thus had no other option but to do the same because neither friends nor family had the time for her. In her interviews she remarked:

> Most people around me were watching a lot of content on their mobile devices. My friend was always glued to her phone and my brother was the same. Whenever I brought my brother a cup of tea he was always on his mobile, putting it aside only momentarily for a quick conversation. I had no one to talk to, there was no possibility of going out, and there was simply no way out – I gave in, started using my phone to pass the time.

While most participants acknowledged that their activities were increasingly digital in nature, the data from the study reveals that not all participants were engaging with digital platforms on an equal footing. This aspect highlights our claim that users of digital technologies and platforms were finding ways to not just use them but 'repurpose' (Deshbandhu, 2024; Deshbandhu & Sahni, 2023) them in ways to overcome obstacles and challenges that they were facing as part of their everyday at the time.

Aarti, who relocated to Midnapore reflected on her tumultuous relationship with the place. She observed that while Midnapore was the city she grew up in and did her schooling in, she hadn't been in it for large amounts of time for over a decade. Having to hunker down there in the pandemic made her feel both uncomfortable and unsafe because she felt extremely out of place. In her interviews she stated:

> Midnapore is a place with no people I can hang out with or no places I can go to. No places to socialize, no coffee shops, no bookshops – places to browse books and read interesting stuff, no malls or cinema theaters. When I am in Midnapore the very idea of going somewhere to be by myself doesn't exist for me.

Aarti reiterated in her follow up interviews that she stayed home for most of her time in Midnapore because there was simply no other place to be in. Similar observations were made by Harshitha of her time in Kanpur. However, in her case, the shuttling between cities and countries was so much (Kanpur, Colombo, Pune; India and Sri Lanka) that she had no other option but to rely on digital platforms and services for both keeping in touch with her friend circle and colleagues but also to ensure that she could be in touch with the things she liked. For example, she observed how she began to rely more on her kindle and on e-Books because it wasn't always possible to access her collection of books, and how she and her friends from the university had a dedicated WhatsApp group where they would discuss a variety of issues through the day asynchronously (as is the case with most WhatsApp groups) but also plan calls, meetups, and events. As most participants struggled to balance the demands of their digital interactions, the older participants in the study were able to not merely reflect on these challenges but also detail the various strategies they used to ensure that they were performing offline activities too. Seema, for example, observed how she had access to most streaming platforms and as she relied on them for watching content in the early days of the pandemic, her screentime saw a significant jump. She felt it was necessary to keep tabs on it and thus turned to a variety of activities like spending time with adult coloring books and experimenting with different media for artistic activities in order to experience moments of solitude. She also turned to fitness activities and exercise but found that most such activities at the time also required significant digital interaction.

> Even when it came to exercise, in a city like Bengaluru one relies on apps like Cult.fit and most things like logging in work out time and regimen are digitally recorded and disbursed. There is simply no escaping it.

A similar contradiction was also observed by older participants in the study like Akriti, who developed the necessary knowhow and skills to operate dedicated apps and access Zoom links to connect for prayers and yoga every day. The hybridized performativities that emerged from translating such quotidian rituals to the realms of platforms like Zoom was essential to the creation of new meanings. As Seema stated and the other excerpts from our analysis reveal, the challenges of defining ideas like loneliness and solitude in the context of the digital are quite significant as disentangling the digital from the everyday lives of the study's participants seemed nearly impossible. The next analytical section focuses on this very entanglement as participants specifically reflected on the role digitality and their online existences play in their experience of loneliness and solitude.

Piercing illusions: discontents of the digital

This section examines the participants' understandings of loneliness and solitude and charts their personalized interpretations of the terms along with the various 'strategies and tactics' (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 91–110) they developed/relied upon to either mitigate

loneliness or create moments of solitude. The role of social medial platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp in these contexts was significant as most participants acknowledged the importance of their everyday interactions on these platforms. However, the data from the study reveals that at moments when the participants were experiencing loneliness and solitude, their online selves were not necessarily disconnected from their networks. It was revealed to be common practice for connected publics to be interacting with various forms of content while feeling lonely or experiencing moments of solitude. This contradiction is best explained by Harshitha in one of her interviews when she states:

> The same tech and digital services I am a part of allow me to escape loneliness but also make me feel it at the same time. You are just as likely to feel out of place online as you are in in-person conversation, however, I feel the loneliness that you experience because of tech interactions makes you feel a lot more helpless and is something everyone experiences. For example, on Instagram everyone else has the perfect life, the best photos, food, and friends, even the photographs are the best that can be clicked. However, this experience is contradictory because, I haven't enjoyed my time with my friends even though I have similar pictures. The entire experience makes me long for time with a different set of friends, the ones that are not in the pictures.

Harshitha's sentiments are also echoed by Aarti in the context of platforms like Instagram when she observes that interactions on such sites are more about mindless scrolling and resharing content than forging meaningful relationships. While reflecting on her relationship with the platform and her expectations of it, she pointed out:

> I don't have the FOMO (fear of missing out) of not knowing things anymore, but what I realized is that the people you see online there – the ones whose names are accompanied by tiny green orbs, are people I can send memes to or forward funny content to but not people I can a have conversation with or pick up the phone and call. If you are lonely even on social media, then where do you go?

While Harshitha and Aarti's reflections on their Instagram use contest Pittman and Reich's findings on Instagram and loneliness (2016), the study's other participants, across age and gender, were also discontented with the quality of interactions offered by social media platforms to mitigate loneliness. For example, Tarun was very clear in his expectations from his social media when he pointed out that he relied on his friends being in India and in his city for meaningful interactions and while he went out to party and socialize every weekend, it was not the same as spending time with his friends. He observed a progression in how he mitigated loneliness on a daily basis as he had moved away from video calls on platforms like Zoom to three friend groups on WhatsApp. He felt the group calls were a close substitute (to the actual thing) but acknowledged that once the call ended – 'the high fades and everything ends a bit too abruptly. The loneliness immediately creeps back in and you can't help but wonder if it was ever away'. Seema highlights similar shortcomings of social media when it came to mitigating loneliness but identifies a different set of contextual contradictions in her case when she observes that being single in a country like India at her age is an exception and thus, she is often out of place while conversing with most people her age or at family events and setups where she can't relate to issues of parenting and motherhood. In her interviews, Seema observed how people in her social circles were struggling to relate to her uncoupled lifestyle and its challenges, and the being unrelatable to others was something that bothered her. However, this wasn't the contradiction that she has found most

challenging: in order to find people like her who she can relate with she has to rely either on social media platforms or dating platforms – platforms she has found a mixed bag at best because 'while the people in similar situations like me are more likely to be found online, what the algorithm curates for me is not necessarily what I am looking for'.

The challenges faced by the study's participants in finding meaning from the digital media they engaged with and the services they relied upon as the pandemic progressed can be seen in Appendix 2. Appendix 2 is a table that showcases responses from all the participants to highlight the change in their perspectives on digital media in the 3-year journey.

Everyday negotiations: space, boundaries, loneliness, and solitude

The final analytical section of this article charts the myriad ways in which the participants engaged with ideas of loneliness while finding time or carving spaces to experience solitude in their everyday lives. How the participants distinguished between the two constructs was extremely important to our understanding of this study and also allowed us as researchers to examine the various ways in which digital technology and artifacts were being used and repurposed by the participants to their advantages. The use of earphones and headphones with noise cancelation abilities for one was something that most participants admitted to using when they wanted to tune out their surroundings in order to have some time with themselves. Seema found her phone's 'focus mode' – where her phone can be scheduled to go into a do not disturb state and also suspend screen & connectivity features – to be extremely useful and was using it actively during the pandemic to finish her degree and in post-pandemic contexts to remain productive. Similarly, Harshitha mentioned how she would keep her phone silent with no notification sound or vibrations so that she could continue with her daily schedule unperturbed and only reach out to digital platforms of her own volition. However, while reflecting on the practice, she observed that this was not merely a strategy to experience solitude but also an attempt to not draw any attention to her phone or herself. Harshitha's desire to remain invisible was also echoed by other participants in the study when they observed that people in their vicinity and the space they inhabited did not always extend to them the levels of privacy they desired. Aarti sums it up nicely when towards the end of the pandemic she compares her time in Hyderabad in the early days of the pandemic with the time with her family in Midnapore:

> Finding a moment of solitude was the biggest challenge. I am someone who has always needed my own physical and mental space but there was simply none to be found once my grandparents moved in. It was seven of us in a really cramped space and there was no space for me to think let alone work. However, despite being surrounded by six other people at any given time, I was always lonely because there was simply no one to talk to in the entire town. It was a bad time for me mentally and personally.

Negotiations of space and privacy were the most common points around which the study's participants drew their understandings of loneliness and solitude. Similarly, experiencing loneliness in situations where the participants were surrounded by people they knew was shared too. Shilpa reflected on how having shared a room with her sister all her life she found her accommodation at the university lonely at first but soon began

to enjoy the solitude it offered. She felt that the solitude was amplified severalfold during the pandemic when there were very few students on campus and found it empowering and essential in helping her grow as a person and discovering herself. However, once the pandemic came to an end, she felt she was lonelier despite having more people around her because all of them had something more important to do and someone more important to meet – 'I could no longer go talk to someone unannounced.' On the other hand, Seema observes how a mere separation in terms of physical space isn't enough to experience a feeling of solitude. In her interview she observed:

> For me loneliness is less about interacting with people but more about preventing specific types of lifestyle choices. I experience it because of being cut away, not fitting in, being excluded from social gatherings and my nomadic lifestyle. I have always been an introvert but also individualistic and a lone wolf – solitude is simply the best. However, you don't experience it just because you have a separate room or space, you need to desire a layer of separation and a willingness to be around others while remaining detached. It is difficult to achieve that around people you care about.

Similar observations on loneliness were made by Praneeth and Tarun where the former felt that loneliness meant his not being relatable to people around him and the latter built on it by talking about the challenges of not fitting in a group. However, both of them felt that solitude was something that needed to be created, fought for and achieved through determination. Teja's and Praneeth's observations on solitude mirror Emerson's understanding of the construct especially when he speaks about stepping away from society to find oneself in it (Emerson, 1870/2007). As these personal narratives of loneliness indicate, there was little that the participants expected from digital technologies or media with regards to meaningfully mitigating it. However, with regards to solitude they did critique the irony that to create moments of solitude they often had to rely on digital tech to escape the interruptions and distractions that predominantly originated in their online lives. Most participants also found it funny that the metrics for screen time and usage were being recorded by the very devices that they were trying to avoid. The presence of wellbeing systems on their devices notwithstanding, the participants were also keen to point out that these initiatives were less about regaining control of their time and came across more like surveillance mechanisms. However, the very fact that users of these devices and services critique the implementation of such features indicates that the participant pool was not only a well-informed and aware group but also one that had with their time during the pandemic developed well set expectations and given to critically examining facets of their online life.

Discussion and conclusion

As this article suggests, the idea of intersecting loneliness and solitude with digital media usage allowed the researchers to examine not just how Indian users of digital media technologies understood them in the temporal realities of the pandemic and post pandemic but also allowed us to chart how their negotiations with their varied digital interactions evolved alongside the realities of the pandemic. Most research examining digital interactions, social media services, and internet use from the Indian context reflects findings from the last decade that has found internet users in such regions vulnerable and at risk (Arora, 2019; Shah, 2015), especially with regards to dimensions of usage and

misinformation. The findings of this study were initially in accordance with the wider understanding of internet use when, in the early days of the pandemic, the participants' reflections of the increased digital nature of their lives were celebratory of the various platforms that they were suddenly required to rely on while remaining uncritical of the transition. However, with time, as the necessity to use digital technologies to work, learn, socialize, play, and participate in acts of leisure became not only inherently unavoidable but soon spiraled out of control, critical perspectives and nuanced understandings began to emerge as they began to question both the demands of the various platforms and digital services they were juggling while also examining the various performative acts that were now deemed essential. This degree of critical examination suggests not only an increased understanding of their digital everydays, but also the forging of new capabilities, and a desire to search for meaning in digital acts and practices in a way that mirrored how the platforms, applications, and services they utilized grew and acquired new features and functionalities. Taruns decision to condense his gamut of digital interactions for staying in touch with friends to three WhatsApp groups for instance, showcases not just an ability to tap into the platform's new feature of video calling groups but also the capability to create avenues of communication where he found most meaning. Similarly, the repurposing of digital media interactions in different ways by Aarti to make a city that she simply couldn't relate to suitable for inhabiting for over two years highlights the participants' capabilities in repurposing their platforms as well as their search for meanings in their everyday lives. Our findings indicate that these meanings, when it came to digital interactions and engagements, were difficult to find, as participants suggested creating value rather, and not through a single set of interactions on a single platform/service but through a series of interactions across platforms where meanings often emerged as complex mosaics after distilling various experiences and acts.

Our longitudinal study from the Global South context of India finds that the meanings of loneliness and solitude elicited from our participants were rooted in the lived realities they were part of. Most of our younger participants highlighted the challenges of losing personal spaces and privacy because they had to live with their parents and extended families at the time. However, it was just as essential to also navigate the challenges faced by older adults who had to open up their spaces to younger people and come to terms with the digital lives, demands and routines that the younger people had constructed. The older people in the study had to forge new capabilities by embracing technology on their own terms and create their own versions of those activities to live, learn, socialize, and perform acts of leisure. In the shared physical space, loneliness and challenges of finding solitude were experienced in several ways – for Madhavi this meant finally giving in to streaming content on her phone, while Satish felt lonely despite being surrounded by family, and Akriti felt left out when everyone in her family was busy with their electronic devices. The study's findings also a highlight a major discrepancy in our foundational understanding of social media platforms among users of digital media in Global South regions like India where the people envision their digital lives pluralistically in terms of use, access, and meaning. Most early studies on social media platforms like Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn, and Twitter (now X) suggest the strength of these platforms in building networks and finding ways to reconnect with people, thereby creating a desire to belong (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Zhao et al., 2008). However, an analysis of the specific responses from most of the study's younger participants,

found the above-mentioned ideas unrelatable and some of them in their interviews even rhetorically asked us 'what do you mean by reconnecting'. Tarun and Shilpa explicitly told us they were already connected to all the people they wish to stay in touch with. In such contexts, where users of digital media platforms and services are not just users of digital and mobile media technologies but are connected with their friends, acquaintances, and are part of the requisite networks on social media from day one, we need to ask – what value do these platforms offer in mitigating loneliness? In terms of creating avenues of solitude Aarti and Harshitha's reflections on 'mindless scrolling' highlight how interactions on social media platforms reduce the possibilities to experience solitude and subsequently could inhibit moments of introspection, reflection, self-growth and creativity (Emerson, 1870/2007). The fact that all the participants, across ages found no meaning in social media interactions when it came to alleviating feelings of loneliness suggests that they desire meaningful interactions which digital media platforms and services struggle to provide, findings that are oppositional to contemporary studies from Western contexts. In countries like India where the everyday lives of the connected publics and 'always on' (Boyd, 2012) internet users intersect with everyday realities like the digital divide, the capability of the participants to harness the power of digital media technologies needs to be highlighted before we observe their acceptance – while solitude can be mediated to a certain degree using digital means, mitigating loneliness was simply not possible. As Seema in her interview observed – 'In short, nothing replaces loneliness, it just goes from being existentially felt to being digitally mediated.'

Thus, newer understandings with regards to the immersive, engaging, and community focused dimensions of social media platforms and other digital media is required but also required is a need for greater digital media literacy in countries like India (Sarwatay et al., 2021). Participants' observation of the demands made by the various platforms they used indicates that a critical engagement with the platforms emerged over time rather than from the get-go and even towards the latter half of the study, most of the participants were struggling to find ways to resist these demands. Initiatives of digital media literacy would enable not just critical thinking but also encourage engagement with concepts like digital exhaustion, digital detox, and the need for a balance between online and offline lives. Future research from the region and similar geographical contexts could focus on intersections of digital media literacy with demographic and age specific participants either by helping us further understand how young people try to find meanings in their digital interactions or paving the way to examining how loneliness and social isolation could manifest in ways like digital exclusion with older people.

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