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IMPACT OF SOCIAL ISOLATION ON MENTAL HEALTH, SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AMONG ADOLESCENTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The effect of COVID-19 took a toll on the efficiency of delivering education due to the change from traditional classrooms to online learning. While the shift to online education was relatively successful, the efficiency of its deliverance was questionable, especially in developing countries like Sri Lanka. This study aims to assess the effect of social isolation during the pandemic on student mental health, social interactions and academic performance. For the study, students following secondary education from 2020-2021, during the peak of the COVID pandemic, were considered. The survey conducted received 1,500 responses representing students of 21 districts with multiple economic backgrounds. To visualise the influence of virtual education, academic performance was measured via examination results from the years 2018 to 2021 (considering 2018 and 2019 as pre-virtual education and 2020 and 2021 as post-virtual education). Survey results indicate that mental health played a crucial role in distinguishing the productivity of respondents, with a majority (72%) showing severe stress and panic with the start of online learning. Forty seven percent of students were not satisfied with the communication during social isolation due to a lack of social interactions caused by the increased use of virtual platforms to conduct academics. Factors such as change in environment, motivation, guidance, and communication had similar contributions ($F= 28.31$; $p= 0.001$) to an overall decrease in performance (46%). The combined effect of mental and social factors affected all students irrespective of socio-economic status. Time management was a key issue with online learning. Thirty seven percent of the study population stated that technology became a barrier to their productivity, while 25% disagreed. Results indicate the absence of a significant impact on the overall results of O/L and A/L. Higher pass rates among males and females in almost all considered districts for both O/L and A/L exams (paired t-test for A/L- $p = 0.007$; O/L- $p = 0.006$) were seen after the virtualisation of classrooms. This study provides crucial insight into exactly which factors have the most significant effect on student performance in terms of virtual education and whether that effect is significant.

Keywords: Blended learning, Factors, Productivity, Virtual Education, Technology