

Crisis and Coping in a Digital Age: Exploring Social and Digital Support Systems in Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Social support is essential for maintaining psychological stability, particularly during periods of crisis. Historically, support was primarily derived from family and community networks; however, these systems have undergone significant transformation in the digital era. This qualitative study investigates the influence of online and offline support networks on the well-being of young adults aged 18 to 24 in Prayagraj, India. Thirty participants described their experiences of emotional distress through semi-structured interviews. The research explores how participants identified and assessed various sources of support during personal crises. Thematic analysis conducted with NVivo software identified four principal themes: emotional crises, offline support, digital support, coping strategies. The results indicate that neither online nor offline support alone is sufficient. Rather, a combination of both, leveraging the immediacy of digital tools and the emotional depth of in-person interactions, is most effective. Small change in social environments contributed to feelings of disconnection among some participants. Academic pressures and unstable relationships frequently change emotional difficulties. Many participants employed a combination of online reassurance and offline stability as coping mechanisms. This study highlights practical implications for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers in fostering accessible and effective support networks..

Keywords: social support, digital platforms, emotional crisis, online support, thematic analysis, coping strategies, young adults

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1. INTRODUCTION

Emotional crises are characterized by intense psychological distress, leaving individuals feeling overwhelmed, powerless, and unable to maintain balance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These crises can stem from academic pressures, interpersonal conflicts, or abrupt life changes, often resulting in emotional seclusion, withdrawal, or a sense of detachment (Durkheim, 1897; Bowlby, 1969). Without timely intervention, these experiences can escalate, compromising both mental stability and daily functioning.

Coping mechanisms play a crucial role in managing such crises. According to the transactional model of stress and coping, individuals utilize both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies to manage distress and regain equilibrium (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Activities such as journaling, meditation, skill enhancement, or seeking guidance from trusted networks have been shown to build resilience and aid psychological recovery (Taylor et al., 2004; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The effectiveness of these strategies, however, relies not only on personal effort but also on the strength and quality of available social support systems.

The advent of digital technologies has revolutionized the way people seek assistance during times of distress. Online platforms, such as social media, peer-support communities, and mental health apps, offer immediate, anonymous, and geographically limitless support options (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Oh et al., 2014). For those experiencing

stigma or marginalization, digital environments often provide safe spaces where shared experiences create solidarity and belonging (Naslund et al., 2016). However, these platforms are not without drawbacks. Superficial interactions, harmful social comparisons, and digital fatigue can reduce the effectiveness of support and sometimes exacerbate distress (Chou & Edge, 2012).

Despite these technological advancements, offline support remains crucial. Connections with family, friends, and peers offer depth, warmth, and the richness of nonverbal communication that online interactions often lack (House, 1981; Cohen & Wills, 1985). The presence of others, empathetic listening, and physical comfort continue to serve as essential buffers against stress, aiding recovery and resilience during emotional crises (Thoits, 1995). Therefore, both digital and offline support systems play unique yet complementary roles in helping individuals navigate periods of intense emotional strain effectively.

Although the importance of coping strategies and social support has been widely recognized, existing studies frequently examine digital and offline networks in isolation, overlooking how individuals weave these systems together when navigating emotional crises. Much of the current literature emphasizes quantifiable measures—such as the number of online contacts or frequency of interactions—while neglecting how people subjectively experience and evaluate these supports (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). As a result, critical questions remain unanswered: Can digital platforms offer the same depth of relief as face-to-face interactions? How do individuals balance online resources with offline relationships when confronting overwhelming distress? What subjective meanings do people attach to these support systems during crises? Addressing these questions requires a qualitative exploration of lived experiences that captures not only the supports people access but also the meanings they ascribe to them.

Investigating the convergence of emotional crises, coping mechanisms, digital assistance, and face-to-face support is of considerable theoretical and practical importance. From a theoretical standpoint, this study builds upon foundational stress and coping frameworks (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Cohen & Wills, 1985) by exploring the interaction between contemporary digital tools and traditional in-person support systems in crisis management. On a practical level, the findings can guide the development of interventions that integrate both types of support, ensuring that digital resources enhance rather than replace personal care. This balance is particularly significant for young adults, who rely heavily on both online and offline networks in their everyday lives.

By shedding light on how individuals perceive and integrate these supports, the research provides insights that can assist mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers in crafting more effective interventions. Such strategies can bolster resilience, reduce psychological distress, and maximize the advantages of both digital and offline support systems (Galea, Merchant, & Lurie, 2020). Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how people manage crises in a digitalized environment, thereby advancing the broader aim of improving psychological care in modern society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Expanding the Social Landscape The digital era has transformed access to support systems. Social media, online forums, and mental health applications provide broad, accessible support that transcends geographic limitations. These platforms facilitate self-expression, peer validation, and emotional relief for young users (Barak et al., 2008; Oh et al., 2014). Digital tools are particularly beneficial for individuals experiencing stigma or isolation, offering anonymous and immediate communication channels (Naslund et al., 2016). Despite these advantages, digital support presents challenges. Excessive screen time, exposure to curated content, and superficial emotional exchanges can contribute to social comparison, digital fatigue, and psychological stress (Chou & Edge, 2012).

The Value of Human Presence Despite the proliferation of digital platforms, offline support remains essential for emotional well-being. Personal relationships with family, friends, and professionals offer stability and emotional security that technology cannot fully replicate (Taylor, 2011; Thoits, 1995). Digital support encompasses several forms: emotional support through likes, comments, and empathy in online groups; informational support via shared advice, resources, and peer guidance; and instrumental support such as fundraising and resource sharing during emergencies. Online peer support groups are especially effective for marginalized populations and individuals with chronic illnesses (Naslund et al., 2016). Evidence indicates that digital support can foster belonging and reduce loneliness (Wright et al., 2016).

Coping strategies refer to behavioral and cognitive efforts employed to manage stressors that exceed available resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These strategies are generally categorized as problem-focused coping, which involves directly addressing the stressor through planning and problem-solving, and emotion-focused coping, which involves managing emotional responses through reappraisal, venting, or seeking emotional support. College students and young adults frequently utilize a combination of these approaches. Vizoso et al. (2019) reported that combining problem-focused and emotion-focused coping is associated with reduced burnout. Ndone and Kiura (2025) demonstrated that coping skills moderate the relationship between perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion, with higher coping skills linked to lower burnout. Adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-solving, cognitive restructuring, and optimism, contribute to

stress reduction and resilience. Conversely, maladaptive coping strategies, including avoidance, denial, and substance use, exacerbate distress and may precipitate crises. The effectiveness of coping strategies is context-dependent: emotion-focused coping is beneficial in uncontrollable situations, whereas problem-focused coping is more effective for resolvable stressors. Support systems can enhance coping strategies; for instance, online peer encouragement can promote adaptive coping, while misinformation may reinforce maladaptive behaviors. The interplay between coping, social support, and digital support significantly influences outcomes during emotional crises.

An emotional crisis is characterized by overwhelming psychological distress that exceeds the capacity of the existing coping mechanisms. Symptoms may include anxiety, depression, hopelessness and burnout. Emotional crises can manifest acutely, such as through suicidal ideation or panic attacks, or chronically as ongoing mental distress. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant increase in emotional crises among students, with remote learning, social isolation, and uncertainty contributing to emotional exhaustion (Gritsenko et al., 2020). There is also an impact on the maturity of individuals; adolescents with high social media addiction are less emotionally mature than those with low social media addiction (Meena et.al., 2021). Ndone and Kiura (2025) found that effective crisis communication and support systems mitigate emotional exhaustion. Adolescents who use social media for more than three hours have more stress than those who use social media for less than three hours (Meena et.al.,2021).

Tucker and Lavis (2019) argue that digital environments alter the conceptualization of crises. Online peer forums often blur distinctions between acute crises and persistent distress, presenting crises as ongoing rather than isolated incidents. This perspective underscores the importance of recognizing evolving forms of distress in hybrid digital and offline contexts. Emotional crises highlight the interdependence of social support, digital support, and coping strategies. Social support offers emotional comfort and practical assistance. Digital support supplements offline connections and addresses gaps in formal services. Coping strategies shape resilience and recovery. In the absence of these resources, emotional crises may escalate into severe psychological disorders. Conversely, robust support systems and effective coping skills can facilitate positive adaptation and personal growth.

The reviewed literature demonstrates a close interrelationship between social support, digital support, coping strategies, and emotional crises. Both social and digital support serve as buffers against stress, enhance coping capacity, and reduce the severity of emotional crises. Coping strategies mediate psychological outcomes by influencing whether individuals adapt successfully or succumb to distress. Emotional crises represent critical periods during which these resources are essential. Many studies have already been conducted on digital and social support separately, and very few have analyzed how these two systems *interact* to influence coping during emotional crises. There is limited literature on how young Indian **adults** experience and combine digital and offline support during crises. Most existing studies are cross-sectional in nature. There is a lack of research tracking **how coping strategies and reliance on different** types of support **evolve over time** during recurring crises. The literature has yet to address how findings on hybrid support can be translated into **mental health interventions, digital platforms or educational programs** for young adults.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how individuals experience and engage with digital and offline peer-to-peer support systems and how these interactions influence their emotional crisis and coping strategies. The sample for the research was selected through purposive and convenience sampling technique. The participants for the research belonged to Prayagraj, India. The study involved 30 participants aged 18 to 24. All participants regularly used digital platforms and had faced an emotional or psychological crisis in the past year, during which they sought support. Semi-structured interviews focused on emotional challenges, preferred types of support, coping methods, emotional outcomes, and opinions on support quality. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their experiences in detail. Two psychologists reviewed the interview questions to ensure they were suitable. Interviews were conducted in Hindi or English, based on each participant's preference, and lasted 30 to 40 minutes in either online or offline. Informed consent was obtained before starting. All interviews were recorded, transcribed word to word, and anonymized. Participants were informed that their information would be kept confidential and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were coded both by hand and with NVivo software to help find patterns, themes, and subthemes.

4. OBJECTIVES:

- To explore the role of digital social support in emotional crises.
- To explore the role of coping strategies in digital social support.
- To identify the factors influencing the perceived quality and effectiveness of digital support.
- To evaluate the integration of digital and offline social support networks.
- To investigate the challenges and drawbacks of digital social support.

To provide insights for practical applications in digital platforms.

5. RESULT

The findings of the qualitative data analysis based on thematic analysis, four major themes and corresponding subthemes emerged, highlighting the diverse emotional and social experiences of participants during periods of crisis. Verbatim quotes from the interviews are included to enrich the understanding of each theme, with participant identifiers used for reference. The results reveal how digital and offline peer support systems contribute to emotional crises and coping strategies.

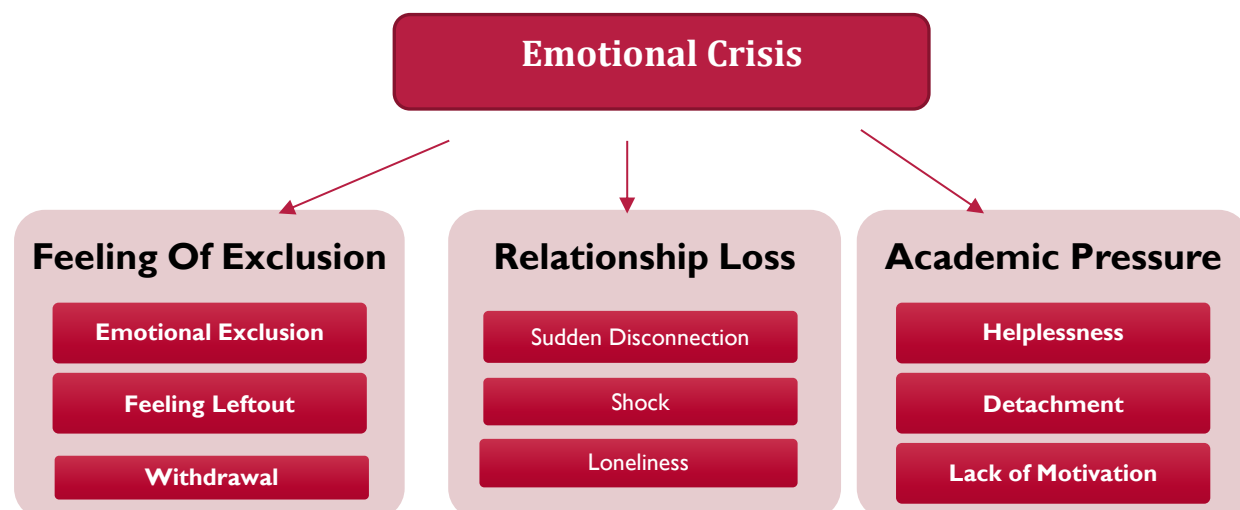
Theme	Subtheme	Codes	Verbatim (Participant No.)
1. Emotional Crisis	Feelings of Exclusion	Emotional isolation	"I felt emotionally isolated... deep down, I was struggling, but I couldn't say anything to anyone." P20
		Feeling left out	"I felt like an outsider in my own group. When they got closer, I did not know where I belonged anymore."P20
		Withdrawal	"I didn't speak to anyone for almost two years. I just focused on studying. Completely cut off."P6
	Academic Pressure	Helplessness	"I had to start doing outside work my father used to handle. I did not know how to manage... I felt helpless."P7
		Detachment	"I started feeling detached from everyone. I did not want to answer questions like, 'What's next?' I avoided people." P3
		Lack of motivation	"I had completely given up on everything. There was this lingering question-'What now?' I just lost the will to try."P18
	Relationship Loss	Sudden disconnection	"We were really close... then suddenly, he blocked me. I kept checking my phone, hoping he would unblock me. I was shocked."P2
		Shock	"It was like an addiction -I'd check my phone constantly. I did not expect him to just cut me off."P2
		Loneliness	"Even when I was around people, I felt lonely because I kept expecting more-deeper connections, grander moments."P28
2. Digital Support	Educational Tools	YouTube Learning	"YouTube became my biggest support system... some teachers there motivated me more than my actual school classes."P21
		Online classes	"I attended online classes. The best part was that I could learn at my own pace. If I did not understand something, I could rewind and watch it again."P22
		Study apps	"Study apps helped me stay on track. Instead of stressing about everything, I followed structured schedules."P26
	Mental Health Apps	Guided meditations	"Guided sleep meditations on Spotify and YouTube helped me relax before bed."P25
		Sleep tracking	"Sleep-tracking apps like Sleep Cycle and Calm were super helpful. They showed me my sleep

			patterns and gave insights into what might be wrong."P25
		Therapy	"My therapist gave me practical advice-fixing my sleeping and eating schedule, practicing self-help techniques... within a week, I felt a big difference." P9
	Peer Communities	Facebook groups	"I found Reddit communities and Facebook groups where people shared their experiences and tips. It made me realize I wasn't alone."P13
		Reddit forums	"I also joined Reddit forums where people like me shared their struggles-it was crazy how similar our experiences were" P24
		Discord study circles	"I joined Telegram and Discord study groups, where students from different places shared their study plans and struggles." P26
3. Offline Support	Family Support	Comfort / Encouragement	My sister and the psychologist definitely gave me the most valuable advice. But t way my friend comforted me... he made sure I wasn't alone."P8
		Physical presence	"Even though it wasn't physical presence, it was still deeply emotional and comforting."P25
	Friend Support	Peer advice	"One of my seniors gave me a digital detox tip. My friends reminded me to take breaks and helped me revise with quizzes." (P26)
		Listening ears	"Talking to someone who genuinely listens makes a huge difference. People online mostly talk about themselves; no one is actually listening to you."P13
		Distraction help	"Sometimes, I'd just scroll through memes or funny videos to lift my mood... Digital content helped me stay calm when I was alone."P12
	Therapy	Professional help	"I connected with a psychologist through an online platform. She guided me step by step, helping me process things in a structured way."P8
		Routine management	"I made a daily schedule and stuck to it. I planned my study hours, break times, and even set limits on screen time. That helped me stay focused."P22
		Perspective shift	My grandmother's support and my parents' encouragement made me realize that life is the most important thing... that perspective shift helped."P21
4. Coping Strategies	Distraction	Watching videos	"I started watching self-improvement videos, relationship advice, and mental health content. It helped me understand that my feelings were valid."P12
		Painting	"I picked up painting again-it was something I had always enjoyed, and watching tutorials online helped me get better at it."P6

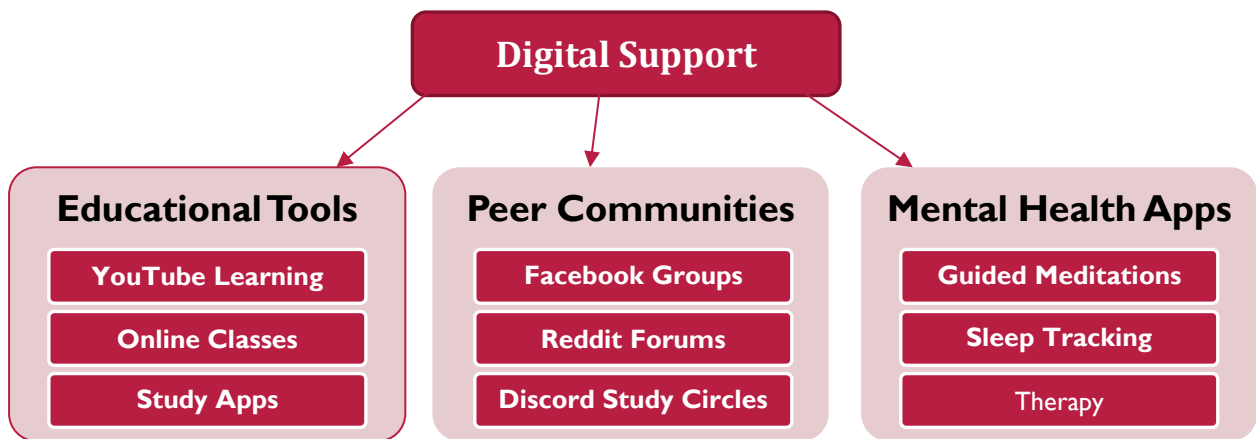
	Skill Building	Journaling	"I started working on myself. I followed the psychologist's advice, took things step by step... I even started journaling."P8
		Online courses	"I attended live sessions, followed structured online courses, and downloaded PDFs for revision. Honestly, I wouldn't have scored well without these resources."P22
	Self-help	Meditation	"I downloaded a meditation app, which helped me calm my thoughts... I learned breathing techniques from videos."P19
		Books	"Books helped me a lot. I started reading Hindi literature, poetry, and shayari I realized not everything in life deserves my attention."P6
		Spiritual texts	"I started with religious texts-Manu smriti, the Geeta, the Ramayana... The Geeta especially gave me perspective. One shloka helped me accept things and cope."P5

Thematic Mapping

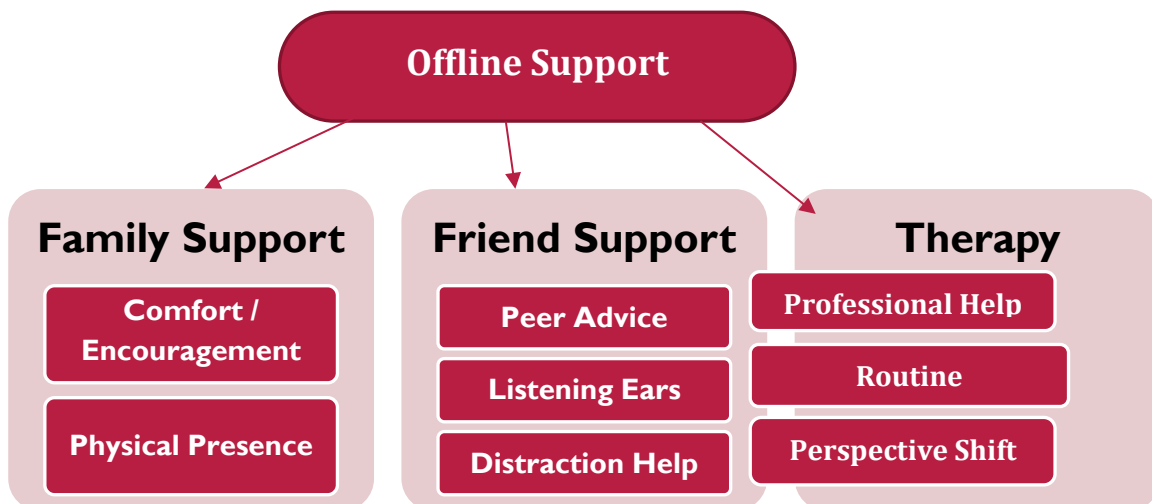
Theme 1: Emotional Crisis -This theme explores the triggering emotional experiences that led participants to seek support, both online and offline. It includes three subthemes: Feelings of Exclusion, which involves codes like emotional isolation, feeling left out, and withdrawal; Relationship Loss, with codes like sudden disconnection, shock, and loneliness and Academic Pressure, with codes such as helplessness, detachment, and lack of motivation.



Theme 2: Digital Support-This theme highlights how participants turned to digital platforms for coping and guidance. It includes subthemes such as Educational Tools (YouTube learning, online classes, study apps), Peer Communities (Facebook groups, Reddit forums, Discord study circles) and Mental Health Apps (guided meditations, sleep tracking, therapy).



Theme 3: Offline Support-This theme captures the importance of human connection in the offline world. The subthemes include Family Support (comfort, encouragement, and physical presence), Friend Support (peer advice, listening ears, distraction help), and Therapy (professional help, routine management, and perspective shift).



Theme 4: Coping Strategies-This theme represents how individuals actively managed stress and recovery. It includes subthemes such as Distraction (watching videos, painting); Self-help (meditation, books, spiritual texts) and Skill Building (journaling, online courses)



6. DISCUSSION

This study examined how young adults in Prayagraj cope with emotional crises, focusing on the interplay of academic and career stress, digital support through YouTube and meditation applications, offline emotional resonance, and expressive coping strategies. The findings reveal that while academic pressures frequently acted as the catalyst for distress, participants employed a layered response system: digital tools offered immediacy, offline connections provided depth, and expressive activities facilitated emotional release and personal growth. These results underscore the importance of viewing support not as a single channel but as a dynamic integration of resources.

To situate these findings within the broader field, the discussion is organized around four central themes: emotional crises as shaped by academic and career stress; the role of digital platforms in providing immediate relief; the enduring value of offline support rooted in emotional resonance; and the contribution of expressive coping strategies to resilience and self-regulation. Each theme is interpreted in light of existing theories and prior research, offering insights into the hybrid nature of support systems in a digitalized world.

Emotional Crisis: Academic and Career Stress

The study found that uncertainties related to academics and careers were the primary causes of emotional crises. Participants often recounted feelings of withdrawal, helplessness, and disconnection, as illustrated by the comment, “I didn’t talk to anyone for weeks...” (P6). These findings are consistent with previous research that highlights academic stress as a major mental health issue for young adults (Keles et al., 2020). According to Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional model of stress and coping, these crises occur when perceived demands exceed available resources, leading to emotional imbalance. This research adds to the existing literature by portraying academic pressure not merely as a performance concern but as a profound social and emotional disturbance, frequently resulting in isolation.

Digital Support: YouTube and Meditation Application

Digital platforms, particularly YouTube and meditation apps, were commonly used to alleviate distress. Participants described these resources as readily available and easy to access, providing guided practices that offered temporary relief: “Guided sleep meditations helped...” (P25). This observation is in line with previous studies showing that digital interventions offer low-barrier, on-demand support (Naslund et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2021). However, participants also noted that these tools served as stabilizers rather than complete solutions, a subtlety often missed in quantitative research. Walther’s (1992) social information processing theory sheds light on why online support may lack emotional depth; while effective in the short term, it often does not foster the level of trust and empathy typical of face-to-face interactions. This study thus underscores the idea that digital tools should be viewed as complementary rather than replacements.

Offline Support: Emotional Resonance

Conversely, offline interactions, especially those that are emotionally meaningful with family and friends, offered significant and lasting comfort. One participant expressed, “A hug from my mom was worth...” (P21), demonstrating how physical presence and nonverbal cues provide reassurance in ways that digital platforms cannot replicate. These observations align with Cohen and Wills’ (1985) Buffering Hypothesis, which suggests that meaningful interpersonal relationships can mitigate the adverse effects of stress. While digital platforms provided immediacy, offline relationships offered depth, authenticity, and stability. This distinction adds to ongoing discussions by emphasizing that offline support remains crucial even in a world dominated by digital interactions.

Coping Strategies: Expressive Activities

In addition to external support, participants engaged in expressive activities like painting, journaling, and creative expression as ways to cope. For instance, one participant mentioned, “I picked up painting again...” (P6), illustrating how creativity enabled self-expression and emotional regulation. These activities are examples of emotion-focused coping strategies, allowing individuals to process their internal states without directly confronting external pressures (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Previous research confirms the therapeutic benefits of creative expression in building resilience and finding meaning (Taylor et al., 2004; Vizoso et al., 2019). In this study, expressive activities not only reduced distress but also complemented both digital and offline support, suggesting a hybrid coping model where personal agency intersects with external resources.

The findings have significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study enhances stress and coping models (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Cohen & Wills, 1985) by demonstrating how digital tools, offline relationships, and expressive practices function as complementary support layers. Practically, the results indicate that interventions should implement a hybrid care model, integrating the immediacy of digital tools with the depth of offline networks and the empowerment of personal coping strategies. This approach is particularly pertinent for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers developing support systems for young people.

7. CONCLUSION

This detailed examination identifies four interconnected factors influencing how young adults handle emotional crises. Firstly, stress from academics and careers is a major trigger for emotional withdrawal and instability, highlighting the critical need for preventive and responsive support in educational settings. Secondly, digital resources like YouTube and meditation apps offer convenient, immediate relief, but their impact is often short-lived and superficial. Thirdly, offline emotional support from family and friends provides genuine empathy and lasting comfort, emphasizing its essential role. Lastly, expressive coping strategies enable individuals to express their distress, regain control, and build resilience through creative self-expression.

The study does have limitations. Its qualitative nature, while providing depth, limits generalizability, and focusing on a single urban area (Prayagraj, India) may restrict cross-cultural relevance. Future research should explore how these dynamics change over time and in various contexts, and how expressive coping can be systematically incorporated into preventive and therapeutic frameworks.

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