Spring 5-7-2022

Coronavirus Disability Survey: Assessing The Impact of COVID-19 on Young Adults with Disabilities

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Abstract

This paper seeks to inform individuals of the importance of digital inclusivity, dimmish the digital divide, and accessibility to technological services of college students who experience a form of disability. The United States has conducted minimal research on the digital disability rhetoric, promoted minimal disability-inclusive measures to protect the rights and well-being of college students, and minimal assistance to mitigate Coronavirus (COVID-19) impacts to this population subgroup. This subject can have a big impact on individuals who suffer from disability stigma, low accessibility issues, and who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Furthermore, this subject will benefit college students who argue in the favor of digital inclusion to help improve online rhetoric and become better equipped with communication technologies. Using survey research, this paper explains the experiences and solutions provided by college students to help alleviate the serious implications resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Individuals who experience a form of disability are likely to be disproportionately affected by the pandemic's health, economic, and social impacts. The shift to online platforms for numerous schools and occupations led to considerable accessibility barriers, compounded by low digital literacy and low confidence. Specifically, college students who experience a form of disability are historically excluded from higher education. Prior to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, there were unique stressors and challenges. Currently, the pandemic is considered to be a major factor to further hindering academic progress and livelihoods of disabled college students. Unfortunately, individuals who experience a form of disability are underprivileged and deprived due to their external social conditions. Hence, little work has been conducted to explore the disabled community's experiences in the United States during the pandemic. For that reason, this qualitative study primarily focused on how COVID-19 had uniquely impacted the lives of college students who experience a form of disability, such as the heightened barriers to effective communication. Along with communication barriers and various other issues that were exacerbated by the pandemic, this study brought attention to the digital disability rhetoric and the spectrum of digital literacy.

This study collected and analyzed results that explained identifying needs of disabled individuals, impact by the abrupt shift to the virtual world, restrained set of digital skills, provision of accessible information, ways to promote inclusivity on social media, new technological advances, the advantages and disadvantages to virtual learning, and the aims to explore the overall digital divide. The term digital divide is the gap between the underprivileged members of society (handicapped, elderly, poor, rural) who lack the accessibility to digital services and the privileged population (wealthy, middle-class, urban, suburban) who have

abundant access to digital services. Overall, this qualitative research study aimed to focus on the digital disability rhetoric and technological experiences of college students who experience a form of disability.

Literature Review

Kakoullis et al. (2021) and Parida et al. (2021) focused on the promotion of inclusivity and accessibility of individuals who experienced a form of disability during the COVID-19 pandemic. The articles support the implementation of a universal design approach and curated technological remedies that commit to changes required in disability-inclusive policies and care that reduced the impact of the pandemic. Research analysists Kakoullis et al. (2021) have provided a list of solutions in support of digital accessibility such as, "Provision of health services via telemedicine and through community-based networks, ensuring equitable healthcare access. Education interventions and reasonable accommodations through online special education classes, accessible education activities, and distribution of educational materials" (p. 3). This quote provides evidence that innovative educational and medical technology may help disabled individuals learn independently as well as provide easy access to medical specialists.

As stated by researchers Parida et al. (2021):

> Printed formats or videos with text captioning and sign language, including subtitle/close-captioning, pictures with messages in sign language can be remedial solutions toward better information transmission among people with auditory disabilities. The electronic media, government guidelines and information should be available in accessible formats like closed captioning, relay services, text messages, sign language interpreters, and easy to read language (p. 4).

This quote provides evidence that there is an unprecedented demand for captioning as a remedial solution towards improved information transmission among people with auditory disabilities.

Cho and Kim (2021) and De Santis et al. (2022) focused on the extent of the digital divide among individuals with and without disabilities. Research analysts Cho and Kim state, "During the pandemic, the lack of accessibility to digital services, combined with the absence of individualized support for Internet use, may deter PWD [People with Disabilities] from the latter, which, in turn, decreases their confidence and motivation to use digital services" (p. 5). This quote provides evidence that PWD (people with disabilities) are more likely to be affected by the digital divide because of low digital skills, insufficient financial resources, and less formal education.

According to a significant study, De Santis et al. (2022) verified that a large group of citizens with specific needs utilize technological resources and care that are indispensable tools during the pandemic, these are resources are considered to be an essential lifeline for college students. Technology is helping to lower many barriers to take advantage of many of the same opportunities for success as other students. This data provides evidence that although assistive technology can provide long-term care for many individuals with disabilities, they are at a disadvantage due to limited accommodations and overall support. They are prevented from achieving their full potential because of their disability.

Campanile et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study involving focus groups by a team of researchers. This study aimed to understand the persistent health disparities for individuals with disabilities and emphasizes the urgent need to develop public health strategies that include individuals with disabilities, including emergency response. The researchers conducted a survey

that asked participants to identify into one of the six disability sub-groups. The six sub-groups are vision, hearing, chronic illness, cognitive/intellectual and/or developmental, mobility and/or physical, and mental health Then, the analysis team identified thirteen sub-themes and categorized the sub-themes into three major themes. The three major themes are COVID-19 impacts, disruption to daily life, and accessibility and identity. The semi-structured focus group were conducted via Zoom. As a result, a total of thirty-eight participants took part in this research study. Although, this study does not focus on the digital aspect, this study does correlate to the qualitative method intended for the current study. The researchers conducted a qualitative survey that geared towards individuals who experience a form of disability to collect results during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on this research, individuals who experience a form of disability are more likely to encounter social, technological, and communication barriers exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Past research did not specifically focus on college students. However, the current research emphasized how the COVID-19 pandemic affected college students attending the University of Mary Washington (UMW). Prior research has not highlighted the challenges experienced by students with disabilities during a pandemic and the purpose of this research is to bring their concerns to the forefront.

Research Question

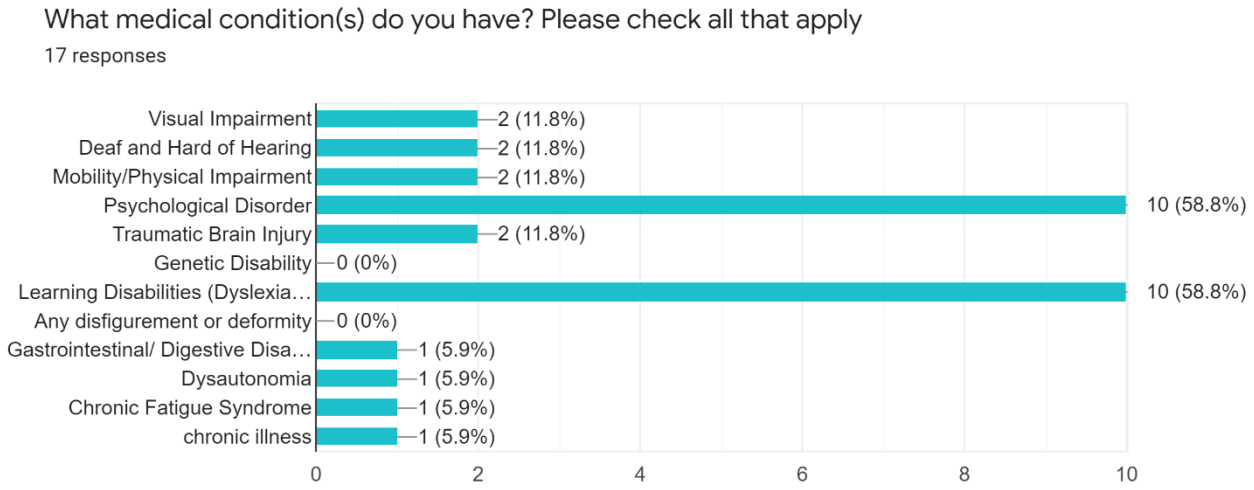
The research question was "Has the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and highlight the need to build a more inclusive digital world?" This research question is crucial for recommending solutions as well as recognizing the immediate attention and constant change that needs to happen in the disabled community. This subject deserved required research because it is worthwhile to pursue and vital to build further knowledge. Individuals who experience a form of disability are more likely to experience difficulty with

effective communication along with various other issues intensified by the pandemic. As a result, there needs to be an increase of digital accessibilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed significant areas of inequality and exclusion in the digital world. Every individual who suffers a form of disability should be able to enjoy equal access to digital platforms and services.

Method

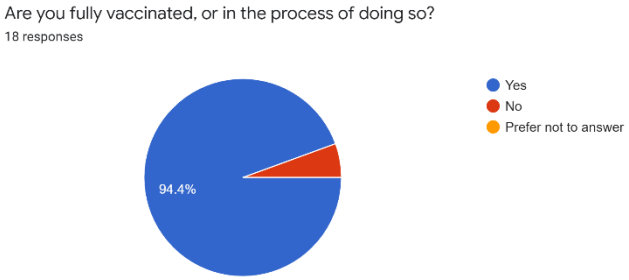
The research method that was utilized for this study was conducting and distributing a qualitative survey regarding the impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) on young adults with disabilities. The survey was created via Google Forms. The target audience and unit of analysis was finalized to be 18-24-year-old college students who experience a form of disability. The surveying method was selected as the study required opinions from local individuals regarding the hardships faced in the pandemic in order to measure the individuals' level of communication apprehension. Qualitative methods are regarded as being particularly effective in investigating a vulnerable social reality like that of a disability. The survey link could be shared quickly, and the form was easily accessible. The first section of questions asked participants what medical condition(s) they had and how the pandemic had impacted their life. The second section of questions asked participants about the digital divide and how technology had been an advantage or disadvantage in their life during the pandemic. The third and last section of questions asked the participants how the pandemic has affected their online education, transportation, medical care, and daily routine.

Findings

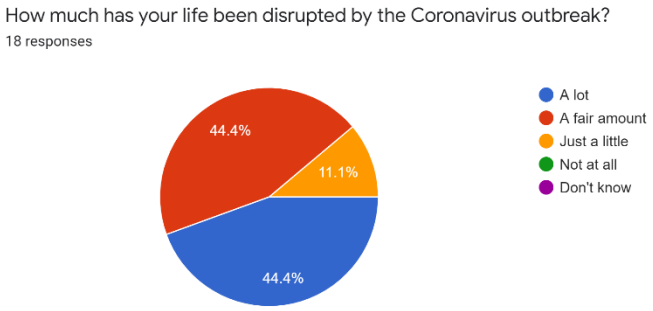


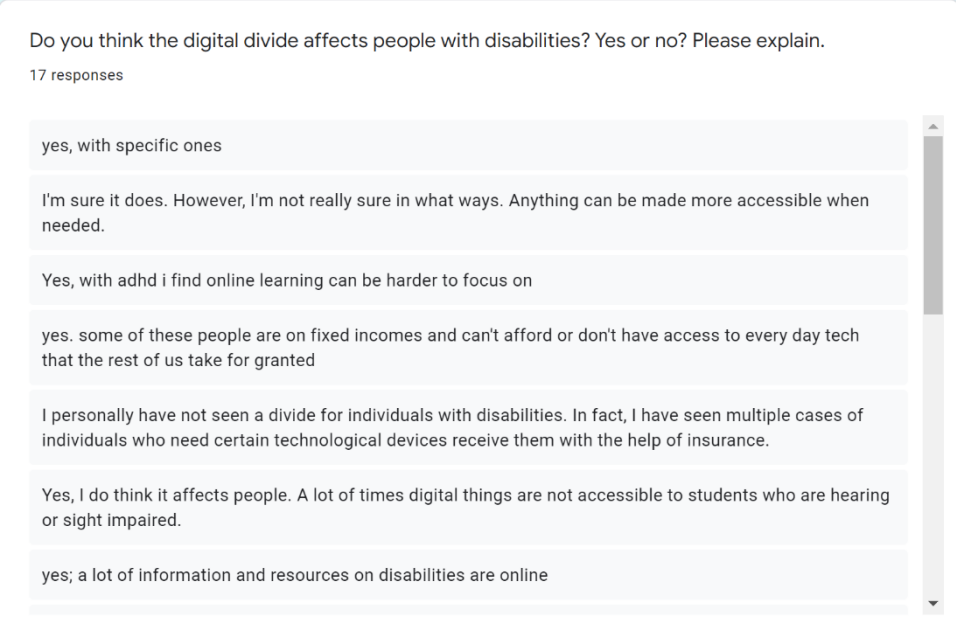
The survey received a total of 18 responses. Visual impairment, deaf and hard of hearing, mobility/physical impairment, and traumatic brain injury received a total of 11.8% of responses. Genetic disability and any disfigurement or deformity received 0% of responses. Psychological disorder and learning disabilities (Dyslexia & ADHD) received 58.8% of responses. Participants have listed their own disabilities in the "other" section. The list consisted of Gastrointestinal/digestive disabilities, dysautonomia, chronic fatigue syndrome, and chronic illness all receiving 5.9% of responses. One participant skipped this question.

94.4% of respondents who answered, "Are you fully vaccinated, or in the process of doing so?" answered "Yes" and 5.6% answered "No."



When asked the question “How much has your life been disrupted by the Coronavirus outbreak?” There was a tie between “A lot” and “A fair amount” being 44.4% of responses. The remaining participants (11.1%) answered “Just a little” and there were zero responses for “Not at all” and “Don’t know.”





When asked the question “Do you think the digital divide affects people with disabilities? Yes or no? Please explain.” The overwhelming majority answered “Yes” and provided an in-depth explanation to support their claim. Two participants had not seen a divide or were unsure. Additionally, these in-depth answers signified how technology has positively or negatively affected their lives during the pandemic. A positive example stated by a participant, “I think

telemedicine has been such a wonderful thing, as someone who has to get a prescription every three months it is so much easier to do from college instead of being forced to go home." A negative example stated by a participant, "I do not like new technology. I appreciate technology but I think we still need to respect the importance and health benefits of human interaction." Furthermore, a majority of participants provided solutions to implement on social media that could potentially diminish the digital divide and enhance the digital disability rhetoric through social media platforms.

Discussion

According to the survey, a total of 18 participants supported the ultimate research question "Has the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and highlight the need to build a more inclusive digital world?" The results revealed that the majority of participants supported the implementation of vaccinations, supported the idea that technology has helped them during the pandemic, and that the idea of the digital divide is the digital gap that must be diminished to restore the social and digital inequality among college students. Participants that received the vaccine provided various reasons, such as morality, protecting themselves and others, confidence in science, and yearning to return to their "normal life/routine." The overwhelming majority agreed that they are comfortable with technology and that it is a source of amusement, relief, a great way to foster relationships, and complete other important tasks. However, The COVID-19 pandemic has been proven to become a huge hindrance in participants' lives which made changes in their daily routine. This data supports that the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities.

Research analysts Kakoullis et al. (2021) collected data regarding improving the accessibility of digital services adds to the idea that the majority of individuals who completed

the survey favored that cutting edge technology proved to be beneficial. For example, virtual learning, medication management, working remotely, and staying connected with friends and family have been great advantages to college students.

The scholarly source Parida et al. (2021) highlights the implementation of captions toward improved information transmission. Parida's research supports this survey's short answer question, "How do you think social media can be more accessible for disabled individuals? Please explain." The survey responses correlate to the implementation of captions in Parida's research. The majority of participants supported captions on social media due to increased distribution and accessibility. Overall, this technological remedy is imperative to creating a better life for disabled individuals during the pandemic.

Cho and Kim (2021) scholarly data that focused on the digital divide correlated to the survey's short answer question, "Do you think the digital divide affects people with disabilities? Yes or no? Please explain" because the majority of participants responded that individuals with disabilities are more prone to become negatively affected because of the disability digital divide. For example, this could be individuals with fixed income, no insurance, and little access to digital devices to students who are visually or auditorily impaired.

De Santis et al. (2022) scholarly source regarding fragility and technological resources correspond to the survey because a majority of the participants have supported that the digital divide notion negatively affects individuals who experience a form of disability. Furthermore, participants clarified the term "digital divide" are closely similar and agree with the articles' definitions. Overall, the disability digital divide compares and contrasts the difference in terms of technological accessibility between individuals and their circumstances.

The scholarly source Campanile et al. (2021) highlight masks hindering communication for disabled individuals during the pandemic. Campanile's research supports this survey's short answer question, "Has the use of masks during the pandemic impacted your ability to effectively communicate with others? Please explain." The survey responses correlate to masks being a disadvantage in Campanile's research. Participants have expressed how masks hindered communication such as, not being able to read lips and having trouble breathing and talking.

Furthermore, the results regarding the digital rhetoric on social media and the digital divide have proven the idea that the digital inequality reinforces existing social inequality. The complex and dynamic phenomenon may make it difficult to access these digital mediums and not utilize them to their full potential. The data collected regarding social media proven that imbedded audio, captions, and other accessibilities for the visually impaired must be implemented to create a better digital rhetoric within the disabled community. The results regarding technological accessibilities and the digital disability rhetoric supports the research question that there needs to be a better inclusive digital world for college students who experience a form of disability. Overall, there was a total of 18 responses which included open-ended, ordinal, and polar questions to achieve the most thorough data that could be collected. The results from the survey support the ultimate research question and the participants did an excellent job recommending solutions to relive the barriers the pandemic exacerbated.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has exposed and amplified existing inequalities, leaving disabled people feeling excluded, discriminated against, and marginalized. The pandemic has further excluded those who are not digitally connected. It is imperative to enhance efforts to address the digital divide and promote digital inclusion by improving the digital disability rhetoric among college

students and take crucial steps towards digital accessibility. Through the research question “Has the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and highlight the need to build a more inclusive digital world?” and through the results of the survey, the data collected provided evidence that the overwhelming majority have supported the notion that the digital divide must be closed through digital inclusion. The limitation of this study was that it included a smaller sample size of disabled individuals. This is a limitation because recruitment and data collection are more likely to have a slower response time while undercounting non-disabled individuals. The suggestion for future research would be to utilize the snowball sampling method. This adaptive method can be useful to populations that are rare or difficult to reach, such as individuals who experience a form of disability. This method may achieve greater participation and results. Overall, this study was conducted on college students who attend UMW.

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