Abstract

Service-learning is a pedagogy that allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, while serving the needs of their communities. It is a recent introduction in Indian education and has faced multidimensional obstacles in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, by innovatively adapting the pedagogy to suit the needs of the time students have ensured that the service-learning activities do not halt completely. The current study aimed to explore the subjective experiences of undergraduate students who engage in service-learning in an Indian educational institution during the pandemic. Data was collected via in-depth, personal interviews from six undergraduate students who are involved in the central planning and execution committee for service-learning. The transcribed data was analyzed through thematic analysis, and various sub-themes and themes were obtained were obtained under the domains of the various challenges faced while engaging in service-learning during the pandemic, the adaptational strategies employed to overcome them, and also the personal challenges and development of the students while engaging in service-learning. The results of the study allow for a better understanding of the experience of service-learning in the pandemic, paving way for institutional policies that can better equip students and allow for greater preparedness.

Service-Learning in Indian Higher Education: Experiences of Adaptation to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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There is a constant strife to improve and better the education system and adapt it to the demands of the environment. Given the hefty impact that education modalities have in molding students' lives, newer ways to impart and ingrain knowledge are always being attempted, and existing pedagogies are constantly evolving. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, education has faced barriers like never before, eliciting a large-scale acculturation of pedagogical modalities to the current times. An analysis of adaptational strategies in higher education across 20 countries (Crawford et al., 2020) found that most educational institutions have, at least to a certain extent, migrated from traditional learning to online, virtual delivery.

While remote education may come with relative ease for classroom lectures and imparting of theory, experiential education seems to be particularly hard-hit. Service-learning is an innovation in experiential education that allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, while serving the needs of their communities. Decades of literature on service-learning establish its effectiveness beyond a shadow of doubt – it has been shown to positively impact acquiring expertise over course materials (Lambright, 2008), professional self-perspective, caring behaviors, communication skills and a community perspective (Sedlak et al., 2003. Given its vast effectiveness, it is necessary to ensure that service-learning can be continued despite the pandemic. However, the challenges to making service-learning virtual are rather unique, even when compared to other forms of experiential education.

Hironimus and Lovell-Try (1999) identify three components to service-learning – the opportunity to take part in service-learning activities, determining the needs of the community in collaboration with supervisors, and finally, reflection and retrospection of the objectives met through the activities of service learning. Bringle and Hatcher (2000) identify two key characteristics of service learning – participation in an organized service activity that meets the needs of the community being served, and students reflect on the service activity to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. This cursory discussion of the components of service-learning reveals that the aspect of 'service' in service-learning comes from students working closely with communities, understanding their needs, and working with them diligently to meet their needs. And it is this very component that is severely hampered by virtual education. In a country such as India, the communities served by service-learning activities tend to be from underprivileged backgrounds. These communities face a dual-pronged challenge with regard to virtually-based projects – limited accessibility to devices and inadequate connectivity to the internet (Kawoosa, 2020). Therefore, how can students who engage in service-learning work closely and collaborate with such communities during the pandemic? Further, as Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, and Fisher (2011) showed, the effectiveness of service-learning as a teaching tool is enhanced by the presence of an environment that supports autonomy, large amounts of time dedicated to classroom reflections and a learning environment that is perceived to be positive. With effective communication being a hurdle in virtual engagements from pre-COVID times (Grosse, 2002; Heller,

2010), how do students perceive the nuanced shows of support from their teachers and engage in effective reflections?

In the context of Indian education, specifically, service-learning is a fairly new introduction. The pedagogy is restricted to a few select institutions, and even here, service-learning is still in the process of making a lasting mark. A good indicator of the novelty of service-learning practices in the Indian subcontinent is the severe dearth of research literature in the regard – research in service-learning is exclusive to Western sources. Such being the case, the obstacles posed by the COVID-19 pandemic are severe. Care needs to be taken to ensure that the still young educational modality is able to overcome the circumstances to make its mark as a more permanent and widespread pedagogy.

The current study aims to qualitatively understand the subjective experiences of engaging in service-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, in an undergraduate setting in Bangalore, India. The study seeks to understand the various challenges faced by students, and the adaptation strategies to assure the continuity of service-learning activities. Finally, the study attempts to shed light on the personal challenges experienced by students with regard to engaging in service-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and also to understand how students have grown and developed as a result of their experiences.

Methods

Questions

- What is the experience of engaging in service-learning in Indian higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the various challenges faced by students in India when engaging in service-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How have students in India adapted service-learning activities to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the various personal challenges and growth experienced by students in India when engaging in service-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Design

The research design adopted was qualitative in nature and attempted to subjectively understand the lived experiences of those engaged in service-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sample

The sample consisted of 6 undergraduate Psychology students from CHRIST (Deemed to be University) in Bangalore, India. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 20 years. The sample consisted of 6 females from urban, middle/upper-class backgrounds. The participants had between one to two years of experience engaging in

service-learning programs. The participants were all student coordinators at the 'Service-learning Club' at CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru. All participants had also completed a 2-credit course in service-learning as a part of their academic program in their first year of their undergraduate course.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling strategy of purposive sampling was employed, and participants were recruited as per the inclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria**.** The inclusion criteria for the study were as follows.

- The individual must have been involved intimately with the service-learning activities for at least 1 year
- The individual must have taken part in or coordinated at least 1 major service-learning project since March 2020

Setting

CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru is amongst the premier private institutions in India. Service-learning was incorporated as a part of the curriculum in the Psychology department in 2016. Due to its popularity, a formal 'Service-Learning Cell' was established. Engaging in the coursework was compulsory for all first-year students of the BSc Psychology (Honors) program while participation in the service-learning projects in the cell was voluntary. A 'committee' of students was also set up, along with a faculty advisor – the role of these committee members was to coordinate various projects, liaise with community partners and manage the student volunteers and their administrative records. The committee members are selected from the pool of volunteers by the faculty advisors of the cell – and once selected, serve a term of 2 to 3 years. Due to the efforts of the cell, policy-level decisions regarding the incorporation of service-learning in the curriculum have been made – and the course has already been made mandatory for various other programs at the university. The cell takes on projects of interest and relation to their subject material and works on them in collaboration with various community partners. The cell is currently in its 4th year of operation and has grown in size and scope since its inception.

Due to the rapidly unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, all schools and colleges in India were shut down indefinitely in March 2020, as per governmental regulations to restrict the spread of the novel coronavirus. Since then, all students have returned to their hometowns in India, and other parts of the world. While classes have commenced online since June, the return to in-person education seems murky (as in October 2020), with no indication from government sources as to when educational institutions may reopen.

Procedure

Semi-structured, one-to-one, in-depth personal interviews were employed to collect data. The interview schedule consisted of 8 questions regarding the nature of service-learning activities during the pandemic, their design and implementation, institutional support for service-learning activities, and adaptation to the pandemic. all interviews were conducted virtually via video conferencing. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes up to 75 minutes. Once completed, interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to understand the data with the reflexive method of Braune and Clark's model (2006). Based on the key ideas, language and context, themes were identified in each transcript. Through further analysis, additional factors or subthemes were identified which then clubbed together to form major themes based on conceptual similarity. Two raters independently conducted up to 4 iterations of the data, and derived sub-themes and themes, which were subjected to inter-rater reliability by calculation of level of concordance. In order to assure trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative findings and inferences, member-check was individually conducted with each participant within 1 week of data collection, and all discrepancies were resolved.

Ethical Considerations

Each participant was given a consent form prior to the interview which informed them of their rights as participants of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured and the limits of the same were informed to the participants. Additional consent was taken to audio-record the interviews. Further, the participants were given the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time without any consequences. At the end of the interview, the participants were debriefed and were offered the results of the findings.

Results

Thematic analysis was conducted under three domains – challenges to service-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptational strategies for service-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and personal challenges and development of students through engagement with service-learning during COVID-19. A sum total of 50 sub-themes emerged through analysis, which were grouped into 14 themes, under the aforementioned domains.

Inter-rater reliability was established via calculation of the 'Level of Concordance' and was found to be 0.9 (retained subthemes = 50; total initial subthemes = 55), thereby indicating a high degree of reliability.

Each of the three domains has been discussed below. For convenience, the participant number has been indicated with a '#' where verbatim samples have been cited, and the subthemes have been indicated with ''.

Challenges to Service-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The domain 'Challenges to Service-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic' explored the various obstacles and hurdles that students experienced while attempting to engage in service-learning activities during the pandemic. A total of 22 sub-themes were identified under 7 themes.

Table 1
Thematic Analysis: Challenges to Service-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Themes	Sub-Themes
Logistical Challenges	- Inability to Engage in Field Work - Difficulties in Bringing Field Work Online - Discontinuity in Existing Service-Learning Projects - Slowed Pace of Existing Service-Learning Projects - Decreased Awareness Activities for Service-Learning - Lack of Access to Target Populations - Lack of Enthusiastic Participation from Members of the Community
Challenges in Working with Communities and Organizations	- Difficulties Collaborating with Communities and Organizations - Difficulties Communicating with Communities and Organization - Loss of Contact with Communities and Organizations
Administrative Challenges	- Administrative Delays - Difficulties Following Administrative Procedures Virtually
Challenges within the Student Community	- Decreased Internal Communication Among Students - Decreased Effectiveness of Communication conducted Virtually - Attrition of Volunteers due to Stagnation of Work - Decreased Availability of Manpower - Need for Virtual Recruitment of Newer Students
Challenges with Faculty Involvement	Decreased Involvement from Faculty Supervisors

Technological Challenges	• Technological Barriers
	• Need for Adaptation to Working Online
Challenges with Uncertain Future due to COVID-19	• Uncertainty about the Future
	• Ambiguous Plans of Action

Logistical Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic posed various roadblocks to conducting field work, causing numerous logistical barriers which appear to be the predominant challenge faced by students – as indicated by the maximum number of sub-themes in the current domain.

Firstly, there was an 'Inability to Engage in Field Work'. Participants described that most service-learning projects were based on hands-on activities and live interactions among people which cannot be conducted currently due to COVID-19 restrictions and can also not be transferred online – *"Also, another challenge that we've faced, for one of the projects, a lot of the modules were very activity based and obviously we were meeting these people in person"* (#2); *"A lot of our projects are very hands on and it requires going to these places and carrying out activities and delivering our modules and everything that came to a halt because of COVID"* (#4). Given the nature of these service-learning projects, participants were facing 'Difficulties in Bringing Field-Work Online' – *"you need one on one interaction as well to conduct the kind of activities we had planned… And you need to see the group dynamics and all that, after 3-4 sessions of only rapport building... these things are not that possible if you're doing it online…"* (#3). Literature shows the importance of fieldwork to a rounded education and its ability to elicit an enhanced affective response (Hope, 2009; Sunirose, 2018), and the circumstances brought about by COVID-19 definitely take away the most from this aspect of service-learning, making it the central challenge.

This massive roadblock has understandably led to 'Discontinuity in Existing Service-Learning Projects' – *"a lot of our projects are at a standstill right now, like most of our projects, actually"* (#2); *"the biggest problem is how do we get like even the projects that we're running, we can't like stop them for a very long time. Right? Because these patients… whatever rapport we've built with them… they'll forget it"* (#5). On a similar vein, a 'Slowed Pace of Existing Service-Learning Projects' even for the projects that were shifted to the online medium was noted by participants – *"they've been really a little slower than they would be if they were in person… a lot of projects have really slowed down…"* (#3).

Participants also reported 'Decreased Awareness Activities for Service-Learning', since these were usually conducted in person – *"we wanted to have an orientation for our juniors… you know, tell them about like what exactly service-learning is, because most of the juniors are not aware… they used to listen to us as their seniors – but we*

don't know how to reach out to them online and still be convincing" (#4). Literature in marketing shows that social persuasion in-person are dependent on interpersonal trust, but these factors do not play a role in online social persuasion (Singh et al., 2014). Since the participants usually employed such trust-based factors while popularizing service-learning among the incoming batches of students, there is currently a dearth of such marketing for service-learning as a mode of student engagement.

Participants also reported a 'Lack of Access to Target Populations', thereby limiting the scope of the service-learning activities. While the rates of internet penetration in India have increased multifold in the past decade reaching a whopping 54% in late 2019, large sections of the population remain inaccessible virtually, particularly in rural areas, poorer states and disadvantaged communities (Kawoosa, 2020). Given as to how students engaging in service-learning tended to work with such segments of society, the lack of internet connectivity leaves them with limited avenues to implement their service-learning projects. Where they are able to gain access to middle and upper-class populations, a 'Lack of Enthusiastic Participation from Members of the Community' was reported – *"it's kind of hard to find people willing enough to sit through half an hour or an hour or something… a session of that length and listen to something voluntarily without any rewards…"* (#5). Among the middle and upper-class populations who have had access to devices and internet connectivity through the pandemic, various newfound phenomenon such as webinar fatigue have started to be reported – with individuals overwhelmed by the sheer number of online workshops, lectures and webinars which leads them to becoming apathetic towards such virtual events (Sen, 2020; Lugtu, 2020). In the current case, it may be due to such factors that individuals who do attend the workshops and webinars conducted as a part of service-learning activities are facing similar apathy towards online events leading them to be unenthusiastic. Nonetheless, engaging such populations remains a challenge that has to be overcome in order for service-learning to be successful.

Challenges in Working with Communities and Organizations

The current theme, 'Challenges in Working with Communities and Organizations' is especially critical – according to both Hironimus and Lovell-Try (1999) and Bringle and Hatcher (2000), community collaboration is a cornerstone of the service-learning pedagogy. Students reported diverse difficulties in the same.
Participants reported 'Difficulties Collaborating with Communities and Organizations' – *"we might not be able to adhere to their demands, given that we can only work online now"* (#2). Research in management shows the importance of successful collaboration and collaborative goal setting across various key organizational functions (Sahai, & Srivastava, 2012; Taylor & Zawacki, 1978). While these studies were not conducted in the context of service-learning, the importance of collaboration is evident in the current setting and its absence has had a detrimental impact on the quality of service-learning projects. This is compounded by 'Difficulties Communicating with Communities and

Organization' – *"our community partners can be unresponsive"* (#3); *"they don't take us very seriously… it's not just a project for us… it is hard to explain that in one phone call"* (#1). The lack of effective communication can further lead to 'Loss of Contact with Communities and Organizations' *"we lose this kind of constant contact and touch when we try to get back in touch with these organizations, they don't necessarily recognize what work they were doing with us"* (#5). A study by Kharouf, Biscaia, Garcia-Perez & Hickman (2020) shows that there must be an effective way to communicate between partners in order to maintain a positive outlook on the common goal. Moreover, communication must be consistent – and a lack of effective communication poses threats to the efficiency of an organization (Raina, 2011). The results indicate that such effective, two-way communication is clearly lacking in the current case, and such obstacles may severely deter the quality of the community collaboration, warranting immediate attention.

Administrative Challenges

While the institution already had in place various meticulous administrative procedures with regard to approvals and permissions for carrying out service-learning activities, the accounts of the participants show that 'Administrative Delays' have become more prevalent in the times of COVID-19 – *"It's difficult to get permissions… it takes a really long time, a lot of patience… it's been even slower during this time has obviously been a little bit difficult"* (#3). This has also led to 'Difficulties Following Administrative Procedures Virtually' – *"there are documentation issues when we have do everything online"* (#1).

The fact that repetitive, documentation-related, administrative tasks are especially stressful for individuals when computerized – has been well-established in literature – a study conducted as early as the 1980's shows that employees face severe physiological and psychological discomfort when engaging in monotonous administrative jobs (Johansson, & Aronsson, 1984). It can be expected that such tedious tasks may very well add to the stress levels of students attempting to engage in service-learning virtually.

Challenges within the Student Community

There is a trend of 'Decreased Internal Communication Among Students' – *""the entire COVID situation has also made it worse* [communication and contact] … *Because at least back in college, we used to have like regular meetings"* (#5). Moreover, 'Decreased Effectiveness of Communication conducted Virtually' was reported with regard to the communication that does occur – *"we don't talk about official stuff for more than about 15 minutes before, sort of debilitating into more casual conversation"* (#1); *"And it's easier when you actually go there and interact with the people over there as opposed to doing the over call or through email because it's easy to get ignored when*

you do that" (#3). Communicating virtually has been found to impair attention span and cause mental fatigue, while also impacting the understanding of the social context and salience of information (Argenti, 2020; Gershman, 2020) – these factors may lead to the decreased effectiveness experienced by the participants.

'Attrition of Volunteers due to Stagnation of Work' was also reported as a challenge by the participants – *"And another thing is that a lot of volunteers are slowly dropping out because of how stagnant everything's become. A lot of volunteers seem to be dropping out. And that's definitely been a challenge"* (#3). This is in concurrence with literature – Allen and Mueller (2013) suggest that burnout occurs when there is an ambiguity in one's role as a volunteer, which is likely to have occurred due to the discontinuity and slowed pace of projects elaborated in an earlier theme. This burnout then leads to a higher intent to resign from their roles. This attrition has directly resulted in 'Decreased Availability of Manpower', to design and implement service-learning activities.

The increased rates of attrition and the need for more manpower has created the 'The Need for Virtual Recruitment of Newer Students', which has proven to be another challenge for the participants. While virtual recruitment has been common practice in large, globalized organizations, studies show that they require expertise to be conducted with precision (Evuleocha, 2002; Yakubovich, & Lup, 2006; Holm, 2009), which is far beyond the scope of undergraduate students engaging in a co-curricular activity. Beyond the recruitment, orienting the new students also seems to be a problem – *"get the juniors or the people who've just joined to sort of be part of the club as well. But what's been difficult is giving them an orientation, finding the time to give them an orientation because they don't really know what it is or what we do…"* (#1). This process of virtual onboarding has been found to be a challenge even in large-scale, commercial organizations (Hemphill, & Begell, 2011).

Challenges with Faculty Involvement

Students currently experience a 'Decreased Involvement from Faculty Supervisors' – *"So I feel like maybe if the faculty was a little more involved in talking about the importance of SL as a club, like, I feel like it would really make a big difference"* (#5). Research shows that students are more likely to excel at their tasks with constant, positive support from faculty (Flaherty, 2016), which service-learning activities currently lack. Further, faculty involvement is a fundamental feature of the service-learning pedagogy (Hironimus, & Lovell-Try, 1999; Bringle, & Hatcher, 2000) – the lack of which will lead to a sub-optimal experience for students.

Technological Challenges

Despite the students engaging in service-learning having adequate access to technology, they did face 'Technological Barriers' which hampered the effectivity of the

service-learning activities that they were attempting to conduct online. These barriers included fluctuations in internet connectivity – *"there are a lot of issues that come with that… like Internet connectivity issues"* (#3); *"sometimes the Internet will not work, sometimes their Internet will not work"* (#2); and also a lack of access to paid technological tools – *"they use Cisco WebEx, which is more effective in official meetings… if they allowed us to use that to do our modules, I feel like it would feel more legitimate to people that were reaching out to"* (#1).

      Moreover, since shifting the entirety of work to a virtual medium was a novel experience for the students, despite being familiar with technology, leading them to feel the 'Need for Adaptation to Working Online', which they believed would require some time – *"So initially it took time for us and for them to adapt to it but then now…we can do it in a better way"* (#6).

Challenges with Uncertain Future due to COVID-19

      Across the globe, the COVID-19 has created intense ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the future. This reflects in the experiences of the students, all of whom reported 'Uncertainty about the Future' – *"A lot of the future is uncertain right now. And like, that's something we're trying to figure out as well"* (#2). Such a high degree of uncertainty may invoke or exacerbate anxiety among students (Grupe, & Nitschke, 2013). Educators and faculty supervisors must pay special attention to the same, and attempt to put their students at ease by engaging in a certain degree of planning in order to reduce the levels of uncertainty.

      This uncertainty has led to 'Ambiguous Plans of Action' for the organization as a whole and the individual projects – *"the conditions are very, you know, uncertain…So we don't know how we can implement it. We don't know how the volunteer system will work"* (#1); *"how exactly do these online projects start off? How exactly does the planning work? What all goes into it? How do we plan for it if we have no idea how it is supposed to work?"* (#6).

Adaptational Strategies for Service-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

      Having understood the diverse challenges that are currently being faced by students pursuing service-learning, the current domain explores the various adaptational strategies that have been put in place to assure the continuity of the pedagogy. A total of 5 themes were identified, with 16 sub-themes.

Table 2
Thematic Analysis: Adaptational Strategies for Service-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Themes	Sub-Themes

Measures to Assure Continuity of Service Learning	• Preventing a Complete Halt of Service-Learning Activities • Adhering to a Trial-and-Error Model to Attempt Newer Strategies • Brainstorming for Newer Adaptational Strategies
Shift to Virtual/Online Medium	• Shift of Projects to the Online Medium • Establishing an Online Social-Media Presence for Service-Learning • Conducting Online Promotional Activities for Service-Learning
Design and Development of Service-Learning Activities	• Development of Service-Learning Activities that Address Pandemic-Specific Needs • Ideating Service-Learning Projects for a Later Time • Revision and Updating of Existing Service-Learning Activities • Restructuring Service-Learning Projects to Suit Needs of More Accessible Populations • Restructuring of Projects as Per Current Constraints
Structuring of Virtual Communication	• Constant Communication and Contact with Faculty Supervisors • Establishment of Streamlined Channel of Communication • Attempting Regular Communication among Students
Relations with Communities and Organizations	• Maintaining Regular Virtual Communication with Communities and Organizations • Allowing Organizations to be Proxies to Conduct Fieldwork

Measures to Assure Continuity of Service Learning

Despite the various circumstantial challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to the students, various measures were adopted to prevent cessation of service-learning activities. The participants stressed on the importance of 'Preventing a Complete Halt of Service-Learning Activities' – *"we're allowing ourselves to slow down*

but not stop" (#1); *"…you know, we don't want to completely go obsolete during… during this time... And we are just trying to, you know, keep on functioning…"* (#2). Due to the novelty of the situation, neither students nor faculty have experience with coping with similar situations leading participants to report 'Adhering to a Trial-and-Error Model to Attempt Newer Strategies' – *"it's a constant, you know, process of learning from past mistakes and trying not to, you know, and being mindful of ... where we shouldn't repeat like previous misses"* (#3); *"trying new stuff out and then seeing if it works if it doesn't work, and if it doesn't work, then we chuck it, but if it works, we keep it. And I think it has worked in our favor so far..."* (#4). The importance of such a trial-and-error approach for business innovation has even been noted in large-scale organizations (Sosna et al., 2010).

Participants also identified the need for 'Brainstorming for Newer Adaptational Strategies'. With a large group, electronic brainstorming has been found to be more productive, which is of benefit during the pandemic situation (Gallupe et al., 1992), which has been attempted by the participants – *"we sort of like… combine our ideas, and we try to understand the best way… the best way to approach a problem, and basically come up with, new ideas…"* (#3).

Shift to Virtual/Online Medium

At the outset, adapting service-learning to COVID-19 has involved a complete 'Shift of Projects to the Online Medium', which according to Yusof, Atan and Harun (2018), requires both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as well as sustained reflection. As elucidated in the above domain, conducting awareness activities were a challenge. However, students have resorted to 'Conducting Online Promotional Activities for Service-Learning'. This has been identified as an important step in engaging with students of the University – *"And that is one of the ways we are trying to make service learning like promote it more for our juniors especially"* (#04). Further, members have found 'Establishing an Online Social-Media Presence for Service-Learning' as a step in transitioning to the online platform and utilizing social media as a channel for communicating information about the organization to its stakeholders (Cheung, Pires, & Rosenberger, 2019). With regard to higher education in particular, Constantinides and Stagno (2011) find that due to the heightened use of social media among the young adult and adolescent populations, it acts as an effective medium of marketing. In the current context, the social media presence may contribute to reaching out to the student population as well as communities and organizations.

Design and Development of Service-Learning Activities

In order to make service-learning relevant, the participants recognize the need for the 'Development of Service-Learning Activities that Address Pandemic-Specific Needs' – *"Another thing about adapting SL to the current situation is that we're coming*

up with a new project which kind of directly deals with COVID. So… the plan is to basically provide people information and the correct information about COVID and how to like, you know, deal and cope with the current scenario" (#5); *"So in this case, it's addressing mental health issues and more specifically, self-care practices... we are trying to focus on mental health because that's a really pressing issue right now. ... and we're trying to target that using behavioral nudges…"* (#2). It is important to note that the projects being developed were being done in a manner so as to implement them virtually, thereby overcoming the design challenges in earlier projects that prevented the same.

In addition to developing new projects, participants were also attempting 'Restructuring Service-Learning Projects to Suit Needs of More Accessible Populations', thereby directly catering to the assets of the community partners (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993) – *"we've been trying to look at another population. So our initial population was children ages 05 to 14. And now we're trying to look at people from the ages 16 to 21"* (#5). The incompatibility of some projects to the online mode has also led to 'Restructuring of Projects as Per Current Constraints' - *"So we kind of also need to change up a lot of these modules and we need to fit them to the current situation because, of course, it's not possible to physically carry out these modules … "* (#03).

Further, given how fieldwork was a challenge, the participants were engaging in the design and development of service-learning activities. They were involved in 'Ideating Service-Learning Projects for a Later Time' – *"… we're still trying to come up with new projects because that's something that we do pretty much continuously… Even if it's not possible for us to implement it right away, if we keep everything ready to go, we can get around to implementing it on the field when the time comes…"* (#1). Further, they also engaged in the 'Revision and Updating of Existing Service-Learning Activities', which is considered an important step of the service-learning process. Monitoring and evaluating service-learning projects and the service-learning process ensure the implementation and outcomes of service learning can by revised (Bringle, & Hatcher, 1996).

Structuring of Virtual Communication

Given that effective communication among students and with faculty supervisors was subpar, the participants developed means to provide a structure to virtual communication in order to increase its effectiveness. The members try to ensure 'Constant Communication and Contact with Faculty Supervisors', which is essential for the academic and social integration of students in service-learning (McKay, & Estrella, 2008). The members have also been 'Attempting Regular Communication among Students'. Leenders, van Engelen, and Kratzer (2003) found that a modest frequency of interaction among team members is required for optimal team creativity. There was also the 'Establishment of Streamlined Channel of Communication' based on the hierarchical positions within the club – *"... the volunteers go to the project heads, the project heads*

go to the core members, and we just see if we can figure it out within ourselves ..." (#01), in order to effectively meander through the meticulous administrative procedures, which were described as a challenge.

Relations with Communities and Organizations

Since community collaboration forms a cornerstone of service-learning, as described earlier, it is important to gauge the strategies that participants adopted to foster the same. The students recognized that 'Maintaining Regular Virtual Communication with Communities and Organizations' is essential to the continuation of their collaborative projects – *"continuous emailing, I think is very, very important for like, correspondence and for maintaining that correspondence like, consistent contact is quite important..."* (#6); *"...after a lot of trying, we have created a good communication system with organizations that is professional as well as friendly…"* (#4). Participants reported that there were regular virtual meetings held with community partners in order to discuss the progress on various projects, and to account for multiple perspectives in taking them forward. Given how even community partners report a lack of communication as a major barrier while working with service-learning projects (Cronley et al., 2015), it is crucial for students engaging in service-learning to take such measures. The participants have also attempted to bridge the gap in fieldwork by 'Allowing Organizations to be Proxies to Conduct Fieldwork' due to the availability of resources and access to vulnerable populations – *"... we're trying to work around it with the help of the organizations and the, like the core members of those organizations itself… By trying to get them to do the groundwork since they have the resources ..."* (#2).

Personal Challenges and Development of Students through Service-Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic

The experience of engaging in service-learning during the times of COVID-19 have led to the participants experiencing various challenges on a personal level, coping with which have also led to newer avenues for personal growth and development. The current domain contains 12 subthemes, grouped into 2 themes.

Table 3
Thematic Analysis: Personal Challenges and Development of Students through Service-Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic

Themes	Sub-Themes
Personal Growth and Development	• Administrative and Organizational Abilities • Communication Skills • Patience • Confidence • Leadership Abilities • Enhanced Research Skills

	• Professional Development
Personal Challenges	• Stress • Pressure due to Concurrent Online Educations • Feelings of Helplessness • Lack of Motivation • Difficulties with Time Management

Personal Growth and Development

Having to manage service-learning activities on an online medium has enabled members to develop 'Administrative and Organizational Abilities' - *"I am learning few administrative tasks as well"* (#6). 'Enhanced Research Skills' were also reported by participants, having engaged in research with a greater degree of autonomy, with all participants working individually from home – *"I think this aspect of understanding ethics to such a degree, ... to such an extent, will really help me conduct the future research work that I want to do …."* (#4). Service-learning has also enabled the members to continue their 'Professional Development' during the pandemic – *"You get like this exposure that you are not getting at home ..."* (#06).

Apart from the direct professional and organizational avenues of development, participants also experienced growth in terms of various soft skills. Confirming the impact of service learning on communication reported by Tucker et al. (1998), there was an improvement in 'Communication Skills' among many participants – *"I understood the importance of communication… communicating with someone of a higher authority, both in terms of someone who's like, above you, or an organization, learning how to communicate with them… and how to do it effectively when it's all virtual…"* (#4). The work involved also encouraged members to learn 'Patience', a trait which facilitates goal pursuit and improvement of well-being (Schnitker, 2012) – *"It has also like, taught me to, like, you know, be really patient and stuff…. Um… I think you kind of build your patience because you kind of have to, you have no choice but to be patient"* (#3). Members noticed an increased level of 'Confidence', which Shrauger & Schohn (1995) found to impact the activities people partake in and how they perceive their future – *"I think this really gave me that confidence and like really allowed me to venture out and do more things and take more part in college activities…"* (#5). Some members also found an improvement in their 'Leadership Abilities' (#1 – *"I've learned to be, you know, a leader within this atmosphere of how the core team works…"*), in concurrence with earlier literature which shows that service-learning induced positive changes in most domains of leadership.

Personal Challenges

Members reported that attempting to engage in service-learning was a constant source of 'Stress' – *"It has been quite stressful... It's been quite hard"* (#4). Apart from the stress that students experienced in organizing service-learning activities online, they felt further difficulty because of the 'Pressure due to Concurrent Online Educations' – *"... your midterms and you have these completely different, this completely different format that we've had to adapt to ..."* (#1). Planning, designing and executing service-learning in the face of numerous roadblocks while also handling routine academic work led to many 'Difficulties with Time Management' - *"it's difficult to find the time especially… according to like the college schedule, which is really like hectic"* (#5). Given that pandemic has stretched on indefinitely with no end in sight, participants also reported 'Feelings of Helplessness' with respect to the various factors that were not in their control, as they were attempting to adapt to the current scenario – *"... there are a lot of things which are not within our control ... We put in so much effort and then there are these things that are simply beyond our control… It makes me feel so helpless and lost"* (#3). Some participants also reported a 'Lack of Motivation' to continue putting in large amounts of work with little visible impact – *"it's quite hard to find motivation to conduct a project that we are very, very unsure about"* (#4). Communication problems with community partners and difficulty of time demands on the students' schedules could be some other factors contributing to a decrease in motivation (Darby et al., 2013).

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a trying time for the world at large, bringing various unprecedented challenges that humankind had not previously fathomed. While assuring the continuity of education has been particularly ridden with hurdles, society has been quick to adapt to the demands of the current times, and even experiential modalities such as service-learning have attempted to find a foothold. The current study explored the subjective experiences of students who have engaged in service-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and attempted to understand the myriad challenges they face, and the strategies they have employed to cope with them. The study also took into account the ways in which students have grown while rising to the challenges, and also their personal struggles while trying to adapt service-learning to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study brought to light various nuances in the experiences of the students. While some challenges like the lack of access to target populations, the unresponsiveness from community partners and ambiguity related to the future were beyond the control of the students themselves, their faculty advisors or even the institutions – the results of the study clearly showed that there were other challenges that could be eased with a greater degree of faculty intervention or institutional support. For instance, the institutional can reduce the number of administrative procedures and

required permissions to allow for smoother flow of service-learning activities. Along a similar vein, if faculty advisors were to spend greater amount of time with the students or if the number of faculty advisors were increased, the need for greater amount of guidance that was felt by students could be met. Similarly, with respect to the adaptational strategies that were being implemented by the students – while the largely successful system put in place by the students is highly commendable, there are various elements that can be standardized and formalized with greater institutional support.

One of the most crucial findings of the study was with respect to the challenges being faced by students. Despite adapting service-learning to the COVID-19 pandemic successfully and using the opportunity to learn and grow, the grave challenges reported by the participants were very concerning. It is important that faculty supervisors and educational institutions must be alert towards such issues that students may be undergoing. Especially in the time of the pandemic, studies have found that most individuals have experienced an increase in psychological distress (Qiu et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Experiencing further strain due to a voluntary engagement is unwarranted, and ways to mitigate these challenged must be looked into.

In conclusion, the current study uncovered the multilayered experience of engaging in service-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Service-learning is undoubtedly a student-centric, student-initiated activity – however, the study highlighted the need for faculty involvement and institutional support for such activities to be successful.

Limitations

The study had a limited sample size – a larger, more heterogenous sample that included more diverse perspectives may have yielded more insights.

Implications and Future Directions

The study attempted to understand the experience of service-learning from the perspective of student volunteers who were engaged in the planning of these activities. However, various other perspectives such as those of student volunteers, faculty advisors, and community partners may also be key narratives that are of importance in forming a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon at hand. There is also a need for longer terms studies that assess the impact created by service-learning activities that are conducted virtually. Further, controlled, quantitative studies are warranted to understand the effectiveness of the various adaptational strategies against each other.

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