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Research Paper

Exploring the Psychological Effects of Social Media on Bereaved Adolescents After the Pandemic — A South Asian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a global grief crisis, orphaning over 7.5 million children. In South Asia, adolescents faced this loss within cultures that stigmatise emotional expression, intensifying psychological distress. This conceptual literature review examines how social media has influenced adolescent grief during and after the pandemic. Drawing from developmental psychology, neuroscience, and cultural studies, the paper examines how algorithm-driven platforms enabled expression but also promoted aestheticized mourning, emotional overexposure, and retraumatization. Findings highlight neurobiological disruptions, performative grief, digital invalidation, and cultural mismatches in grief models. The review calls for grief-informed digital practices, trauma-sensitive interventions, and culturally grounded support systems. Without structural empathy, bereaved South Asian adolescents risk being emotionally adrift and excluded from academic and clinical discourse.

Keywords: *Adolescent Grief, Social Media, South Asia, COVID-19 Orphanhood, Disenfranchised Grief, Digital Mourning, Cultural Psychology*

Grief Meet Algorithm

Parental figures are foundational to a child's psychological and emotional development, serving as anchors of safety and identity, especially during adolescence, a period marked by identity formation, emotional volatility, and evolving autonomy (Steinberg, 2001).

Losing a parent during this critical phase can destabilise attachment, reduce self-worth, and increase susceptibility to anxiety and emotional dysregulation (Betts et al., 2009; Murberg & Bru, 2004).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these effects. Widespread bereavement, social restrictions, and strained mental health services left grieving adolescents isolated and unsupported. With traditional coping mechanisms unavailable, many turned to social media not just for distraction but as a means of expressing grief and seeking validation.

This review explores how social media shaped adolescent grief during the pandemic, highlighting its dual role as both a support system and a source of psychological risk. Particular attention is given to South Asian adolescents, for whom grief is further

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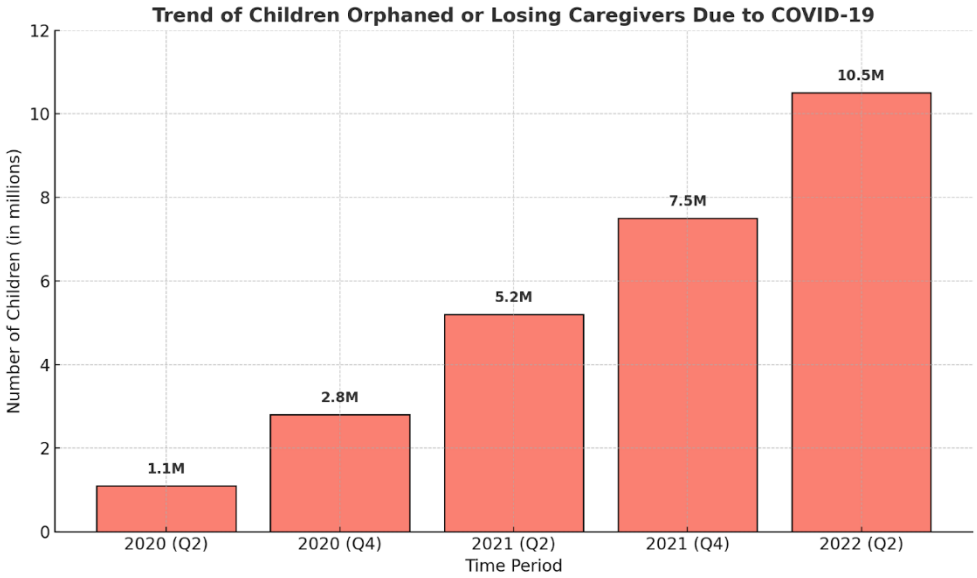
complicated by cultural norms that stigmatise emotional expression and mental health struggles.

COVID-19 and Orphanhood

The graph below synthesises global estimates of COVID-19-related caregiver loss among children, revealing a steep rise in impact. Between March 2020 and April 2021, approximately 1.13 million children lost a primary caregiver, increasing to over 5.2 million by October 2021 (Hillis et al., 2021; Hillis, Cluver, et al., 2022). By May 2022, over 10.5 million had lost a caregiver, with 7.5 million orphaned (Unwin et al., 2022). This escalating crisis reflects a "hidden pandemic" of grief and underscores the urgent need for culturally sensitive, grief-informed mental health interventions.



In South Asia, thousands were abruptly placed in unfamiliar caregiving environments, often without sufficient emotional or financial support (UNICEF, 2021). Adolescents in such circumstances frequently assumed adult responsibilities and faced chronic stress without professional guidance.

The emotional consequences were severe: feelings of sadness, fear, and guilt were often repressed or redirected into risk-taking, aggression, or self-harm (Loades et al., 2020). In-person support systems collapsed, and while digital spaces offered outlets for connection, they also exposed adolescents to emotionally unregulated environments that sometimes trivialised or commodified grief.

Social Media: Coping and Risk

Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook became informal mourning spaces during the pandemic. Adolescents posted tributes, shared memories, and created hashtags as ways to grieve publicly and find social affirmation (Eriksson Krutrök, 2021; Nesi et al., 2021).

However, these platforms also encouraged performative grief, as adolescents sought validation through likes and comments. Vulnerability was often misread as attention-seeking, resulting in bullying or grief-shaming (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Algorithmic content loops frequently resurfaced trauma-related material, exacerbating distress.

For adolescents in South Asian contexts, where mental health remains stigmatised, these dynamics were especially harmful. Cultural expectations of stoicism and family privacy often limited emotional expression. When mirrored online—through judgment or silence—these norms deepened emotional isolation (Prizeman et al., 2023; Mak & Cheung, 2014; National Council on Aging, 2024).

Grief and Algorithms

Viral trends and superficial engagement shaped the digital language of grief during the pandemic. Clinical terms like "depression" and "trauma" were used casually, diluting their meaning (Waldman, 2021). This discouraged help-seeking and normalized distress. Without access to professional support, adolescents navigating grief in algorithm-driven environments were often left alone with overwhelming emotions. In spaces that rewarded performance over authenticity, grief became distorted and isolating.

The Psychology of Adolescent Grief

Adolescence is a critical developmental phase marked by identity formation, emotional maturation, and increased autonomy. The death of a parent during this period profoundly disrupts an adolescent's psychological stability. Bereaved adolescents must navigate grief while their cognitive and emotional capacities are still developing, often resulting in non-linear mourning that evolves alongside shifting self-perceptions and social roles.

The Neurobiological Mechanisms of Complicated Grief in the Digital Age

Traditional frameworks—such as Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief or Worden's tasks of mourning—presume a level of emotional maturity that adolescents are still in the process of developing (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Worden, 2009). Rather than progressing through grief in a linear sequence, adolescents often experience cyclical and fluctuating responses, shaped by hormonal shifts, peer relationships, and evolving identity formation (Steinberg, 2014).

This instability is further exacerbated by conflicting expectations placed on adolescents. They are encouraged to exhibit emotional independence and take on adult-like responsibilities while remaining psychologically reliant on caregivers. The death of a parent disrupts this precarious balance. Surviving caregivers—who may be preoccupied with their own grief—can become emotionally unavailable, leaving the adolescent feeling unsupported and isolated.

Digital environments further complicate the mourning process. Social media often presents grief in stylised and romanticised forms, where curated posts, filtered images, and hashtags create an aestheticised portrayal of loss. This can contribute to the development of complicated grief—a persistent, debilitating mourning response that becomes digitally normalised and goes unaddressed due to its pervasiveness in online spaces.

This phenomenon is especially concerning when viewed through the lens of neurobiology. Digital mourning spaces may reinforce persistent dysregulation across core neural circuits. Neuroimaging studies have revealed hyperactivation of the nucleus accumbens, a key region involved in reward processing, in response to reminders of the deceased. This activation mirrors craving patterns observed in addiction (O'Connor et al., 2008). Simultaneously, the amygdala exhibits sustained hyperreactivity, contributing to heightened emotional arousal, while reduced activity in the prefrontal cortex compromises executive functioning and

emotional regulation (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Overactivation of the subgenual anterior cingulate cortex (sgACC) has also been linked to prolonged psychological pain and maladaptive rumination (McConnell et al., 2018).

Repeated exposure to grief-related content on social media can intensify these neurobiological mechanisms, reinforcing maladaptive patterns of yearning, avoidance, and emotional dysregulation. Biochemically, complicated grief is associated with dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, resulting in elevated cortisol levels and impaired hippocampal function (Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007). Disruptions in serotonergic transmission may further reduce emotional regulation and increase vulnerability to depression and suicidality (Disner et al., 2011), while dopaminergic hyperactivity within the mesolimbic system may perpetuate obsessive and compulsive longing (O'Connor et al., 2008).

Prolonged exposure to such dysregulation can result in measurable structural changes to the brain. Neuroimaging studies on affective disorders and prolonged emotional distress have shown reduced grey matter volume in the medial prefrontal cortex, involved in executive function and emotional regulation, and the hippocampus, essential for memory and learning (Rao et al., 2010; Yu et al., 2024).

Altered connectivity between the default mode network and the salience network further impairs self-regulation and attention. These neuroanatomical changes underscore the long-term psychological and biological costs of unresolved grief.

Within digital contexts, such vulnerabilities are continually exacerbated by the constant re-exposure to grief content, fostering patterns of mourning that are not only socially normalised but also neurobiologically entrenched.

In light of this, mental health interventions must move beyond rigid, stage-based models of grief. Effective support requires a nuanced understanding of adolescent neurodevelopment, digital behaviour, and sociocultural context. In many cases, grief during adolescence masks deeper psychological challenges such as unresolved trauma, identity confusion, and abandonment anxiety, all of which demand integrated, developmentally appropriate care.

Parental Loss and Identity Formation

Erikson's psychosocial model situates adolescents in the stage of "Identity vs. Role Confusion," a period during which emotional guidance and stable role models are critical for the consolidation of self-concept (Erikson, 1968). The loss of a parent during this stage can destabilise the adolescent's emotional core, often leading to fragmented identity, low self-worth, and insecurity. Neurodevelopmentally, this period corresponds with the remodelling of the prefrontal cortex and limbic system, regions crucial for impulse control, emotional regulation, and social reasoning (Casey et al., 2008). Parental absence disrupts co-regulation of affect, leading to overactivation of the amygdala and elevated cortisol levels—biomarkers of chronic stress and emotional dysregulation (Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007).

Attachment theory reinforces these vulnerabilities. Bowlby and Ainsworth emphasise the importance of emotionally attuned caregivers for secure attachment and self-regulation (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth et al., 1978). During the pandemic, kinship care—though culturally common in South Asia—often lacked emotional synchrony. Extended family

members, while physically present, were frequently unequipped to address adolescents' psychological needs (Cluver et al., 2022), leaving many youth in a state of affective dysregulation and relational insecurity.

Pandemic stressors such as school closures, economic strain, and prolonged isolation compounded this emotional instability. In South Asia, where collectivist norms emphasise stoicism and family duty, adolescents—especially boys—were discouraged from expressing grief openly. The pressure to "be strong" led to internalised distress, often somatised or expressed through aggression, withdrawal, or risk-taking behaviour. Social media, though initially a source of solace, frequently echoed these norms. Online spaces like Facebook and Snapchat idealised stylised mourning, promoting aestheticised grief while discouraging raw emotional expression (Gaiha et al., 2020). This digital curation further impaired authentic processing of loss. Emerging studies from India and neighbouring regions link parental loss during the pandemic with heightened rates of depression, anxiety, substance use, and academic disengagement (Patra & Patro, 2020; Maselko et al., 2024).

Without trauma-informed, culturally sensitive mental health interventions, these adolescents risk neurobiological scarring, with long-term effects on emotional regulation, identity development, and adult relationships.

Grieving in the Context of Mass Trauma

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted not only a public health crisis but also a global trauma event. For adolescents who lost parents, individual grief was subsumed within collective tragedy, rendering their mourning invisible. This led to disenfranchised grief—mourning that is unacknowledged by society (Doka, 1989; Eisma & Tamminga, 2021).

In South Asian collectivist cultures, emphasis on family survival and collective responsibility often overshadowed individual grief. Adolescents were expected to prioritise household roles or care for siblings—placing them in a psychological "survival mode" that deprioritised emotional processing (Kar et al., 2022; Nolte et al., 2020).

The disruption of funeral rites and mourning rituals led to ambiguous loss, where the absence of closure made it difficult for adolescents to emotionally register their bereavement (Kokou-Kpolou et al., 2020). In many cases, teens could not visit hospitals or perform last rites, leaving the death experience unreal and unresolved. Over time, these unprocessed emotions often surfaced as anxiety, detachment, or anger in bereaved adolescents (Nilsson et al., 2022; Røseth et al., 2021).

Online grief spaces—memorial pages, hashtags, and virtual communities—offered limited catharsis. However, these were also environments where toxic positivity was rampant: messages urging adolescents to "move on" or "stay strong" invalidated complex grief responses (Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017). Adolescents who deviated from gendered or cultural grief norms were also targets of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

As schools reopened and social life resumed, grieving adolescents often found themselves emotionally out of sync with their peers. Some had matured rapidly; others remained frozen in unresolved mourning. This mismatch deepened interpersonal rifts and fostered isolation.

COVID-19 and Its Effect on Adolescent Development

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted adolescent development, particularly for those who lost one or both parents. This loss represented more than temporary emotional trauma; it disrupted caregiving stability, psychological security, and access to essential developmental supports, fundamentally altering the trajectory of grief as a whole.

Loss of Parental Support and Unstable Caregiving Environments

In under-resourced communities, the pandemic disproportionately affected bereaved adolescents, many of whom were placed in emergency caregiving arrangements such as extended family homes, shelters, or even child-headed households (UNICEF, 2021). These environments often lacked the emotional consistency and neurocognitive stimulation necessary for healthy grief processing. Caregivers themselves were frequently overwhelmed, leading to neglect, disrupted routines, and in some cases, abuse—conditions known to dysregulate the adolescent hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, elevate cortisol levels, and impair emotional development (Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007).

Parental figures are critical for emotional co-regulation, moral scaffolding, and behavioural modelling during adolescence, a period marked by rapid neural remodelling in the prefrontal cortex and limbic system (Casey et al., 2008). Their absence weakens executive function and self-regulation, making adolescents more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and impulsivity (Patra & Patro, 2020). In South Asian societies, where emotional expression is often culturally restrained and family hierarchies are rigid, adolescents are expected to adapt without complaint, suppressing grief and assuming adult responsibilities prematurely. This intersection of cultural pressure, unstable caregiving, and unprocessed loss created a high-risk psychosocial landscape that stifled healing.

Risk Behaviours and Mental Health Deterioration

In the absence of stable support systems, grieving adolescents often adopt maladaptive coping strategies such as **substance use, self-harm, disordered eating, and high-risk behaviors** (e.g., unsafe sex, reckless driving) (Fisher et al., 2022; Micali et al., 2015). Emotional withdrawal, aggression, and defiance were common, particularly when therapeutic support was unavailable.

South Asia's already limited mental health infrastructure was further strained during the pandemic. Access to grief counselling, trauma-informed care, and psychoeducational programs was especially scarce in rural and low-income regions, contributing to the underdiagnosis of conditions like prolonged grief disorder (PGD), depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation (Mash, 2019; Thornicroft et al., 2017). Chronic stress and grief, unbuffered by professional intervention, may also dysregulate the HPA axis and impair neurotransmitter systems involved in mood regulation and emotional resilience (Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007).

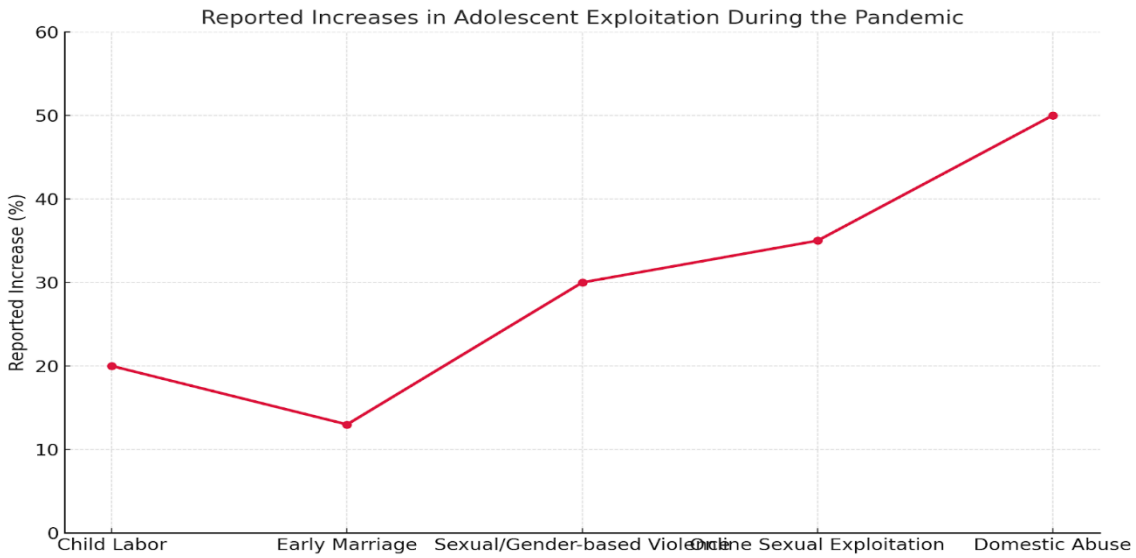
Compounding emotional trauma, adolescents faced socioeconomic instability, including food insecurity, school dropout, and housing precarity. Girls were often burdened with caregiving roles, sacrificing education and autonomy. In this context, emotional suppression was normalised; endurance was valued over healing. Many adolescents internalised this cultural narrative, prioritising family survival over their psychological recovery.

Exploitation, Online Harm, and Marginalisation

The pandemic heightened adolescents' vulnerability to exploitation across both physical and digital spaces. Weakened guardianship and legal protections led to sharp increases in child labour, early marriage, trafficking, and gender-based violence, especially in under-resourced settings (UNODC, 2022; ECPAT International, 2021).. Girls faced elevated risks of sexual exploitation, while boys were often pushed into unsafe labour due to economic strain.

Simultaneously, prolonged lockdowns increased adolescents' unsupervised digital exposure. Grieving youth—already emotionally isolated—were particularly susceptible to online grooming, coercion, and abuse. Social media, while offering a space for memorialization, also became a site of cyberbullying, grief-shaming, and viral trends that trivialised loss. Adolescents from marginalised caste, ethnic, or LGBTQ+ groups faced compounded risks due to pre-existing social exclusion and discrimination.

These experiences frequently resulted in distorted self-image, internalised shame, and social withdrawal. Many adolescents avoided help-seeking due to stigma, cultural taboos, or lack of digital literacy (Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). As such, digital platforms became double-edged: spaces for connection that simultaneously magnified retraumatization. Culturally sensitive interventions must consider not just access to support, but also online safety, context, and the unique vulnerabilities of grieving youth.



Social Media and Digital Mourning

With the COVID-19 pandemic halting traditional mourning practices, many adolescents found themselves grieving in emotional isolation. Funerals were restricted, peer support was fragmented, and access to counselling was limited. In this void, social media became a substitute space for mourning, offering adolescents tools to express loss, find community, and seek validation. Yet this digital mourning came with its own psychological and cultural costs, particularly for vulnerable youth navigating bereavement without in-person guidance.

Aestheticised Grief and the Pressure to Perform

With traditional mourning rituals disrupted, adolescents turned to social media for public grief expression. However, these platforms rewarded visual appeal, not emotional

authenticity. Teens felt pressure to present their grief through filters, poetic captions, and trends, blurring the line between sincerity and performance (DeGroot, 2014; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Public mourning risked judgment, while silence risked invisibility. When posts failed to elicit support, many felt invalidated and emotionally isolated (Christensen & Gotved, 2015; Byron, 2019).

Hashtags, Validation, and the Performance of Belonging

Grief hashtags like #COVIDloss and #griefTok created online spaces for connection, especially valuable in cultures where emotional expression is discouraged (Brubaker et al., 2013). Yet, these digital communities had their hierarchies.

Posts that were eloquent or visually polished received more engagement, encouraging adolescents to tailor their grief for validation (Nansen et al., 2017). Those unable to meet these unspoken standards often felt their mourning was inadequate. Constant exposure to others' pain could also lead to emotional fatigue or secondary trauma, turning once-supportive spaces into overwhelming cycles of unprocessed sorrow.

Algorithmic Exposure and Emotional Contagion

Unlike physical mourning spaces, digital platforms are driven by algorithms optimised for engagement, not emotional wellbeing. A single click or comment on a grief-related post can trigger a cycle of persistent exposure to similar content, keeping adolescents immersed in grief far beyond natural cycles of processing (Bayer et al., 2018). This exposure fosters emotional contagion, where adolescents absorb and mirror the emotional tone of the content they consume. Studies show this can heighten sadness, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation, particularly among already vulnerable users (Kramer et al., 2014). For adolescents grieving the death of a parent, this can amplify feelings of hopelessness or numbness.

Many adolescents, unaware of how algorithmic feedback loops work, may interpret the repeated presence of grief content as a reflection of their reality, reinforcing beliefs that suffering is constant or that public expressions of pain are expected. While social media did offer short-term catharsis, sustained interaction with grief-saturated content often led to emotional suppression, fatigue, and avoidance behaviours. Moreover, publicly grieving teens became vulnerable to unsolicited attention or even exploitation in online spaces, further complicating their healing process (Livingstone et al., 2017).

Humour, Disconnection, and the Culture of Suppressed Grief

In the aftermath of the pandemic, adolescents often turned to digital humour—memes, ironic trends, and sarcastic reels—as a way to cope. While this content created a sense of community and momentary relief, grieving teens—especially those who lost parents—felt increasingly disconnected. Their experience of hospital visits, funeral restrictions, and emotional loss clashed with the online culture of lighthearted nostalgia (Baker et al., 2021). Biologically, humour activates the mesolimbic dopamine system, offering a temporary sense of reward and emotional distance. But when repeatedly used to mask grief, it may interfere with the prefrontal cortex–amygdala circuitry responsible for emotional processing and regulation (Samson & Gross, 2012). Social media environments that reward levity over authenticity reinforce this imbalance. Adolescents shaped their content around peer validation, prioritising laughter over lament, often at the cost of emotional healing.

In cultures where stoicism is idealised—such as many parts of South Asia—humour becomes one of the only socially acceptable ways to express distress. Yet this performance of resilience often conceals unresolved pain. Without safe spaces for vulnerability, adolescents may suppress grief so thoroughly that it becomes biologically encoded, leading to heightened cortisol responses, reduced hippocampal volume, and difficulties with memory, self-regulation, and emotional expression over time (Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007; Disner et al., 2011).

Emotional Silencing, Cultural Expectations, and Peer Detachment

Adolescents grieving a parent during the pandemic experienced not only profound loss but also an emotional environment that actively discouraged expression. Online spaces were flooded with humour, filtered positivity, and emotional detachment, leaving little room for grief. This digital dissonance created a mismatch between internal sorrow and public discourse, which adolescents often resolved by self-censoring or curating neutral, unaffected personas (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

This disconnect can have serious neurobiological consequences. Adolescents are in a critical period of neural plasticity, particularly in the default mode network and limbic system, which regulate identity, self-awareness, and emotional memory. Repeated invalidation and emotional suppression during this stage can restructure how the brain processes affect, leading to long-term impairments in emotional regulation and increased vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and trauma-related disorders (Li et al., 2022).

Culturally, expectations around silence, resilience, and duty—especially for girls and eldest children—meant grief was often internalised. In South Asian households, the pressure to "be strong" and resume responsibilities quickly led to what psychologists call toxic resilience: functional outward behaviour masking unresolved trauma (Becker et al., 2023). Without emotional vocabulary or culturally competent mental health support, adolescents struggled to make sense of their pain.

Compounding this was the role of peers. Most adolescents lacked the emotional literacy to support grieving friends, and many responded with silence, discomfort, or dismissiveness. This social detachment intensified what is known as disenfranchised grief—a form of mourning that is socially unacknowledged, leading to further isolation and internal confusion (Doka, 2002). The combination of cultural restraint, peer discomfort, and neurodevelopmental vulnerability created a landscape where grief was not just unspoken—it was biologically and emotionally buried.

Intervention, Digital Awareness, and Mental Health Recommendations

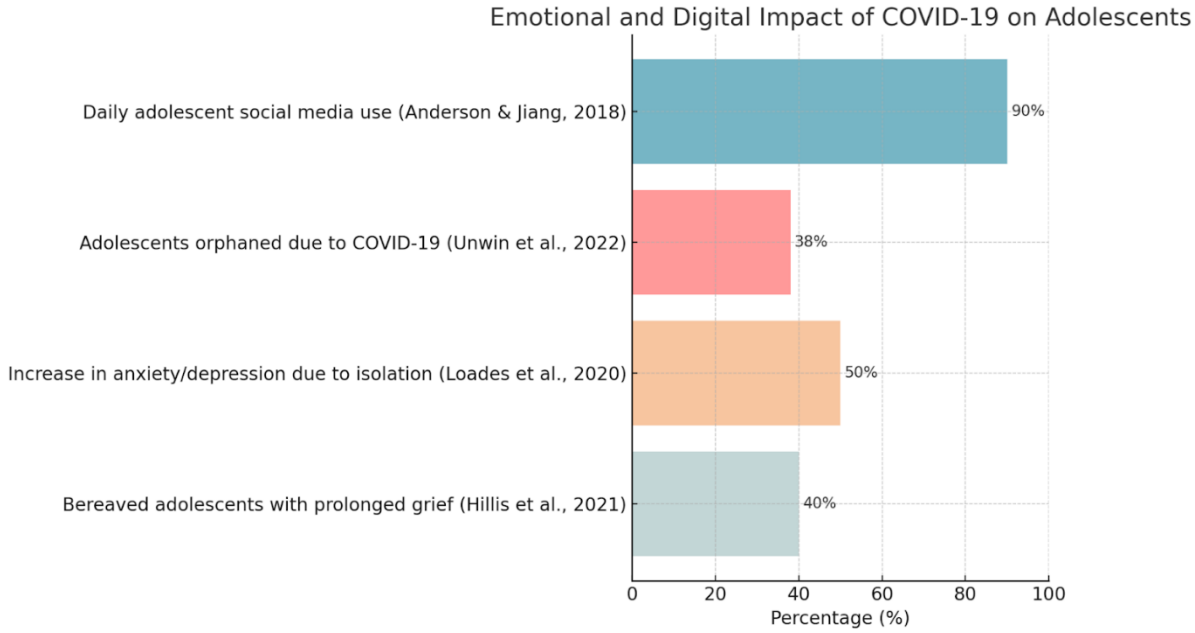
Adolescents navigating parental loss in the post-pandemic digital age require support that recognises the complexity of their grief—especially in environments shaped by performance, pressure, and cultural contradiction. This section outlines key areas of intervention that acknowledge how online exposure, academic systems, and cultural expectations uniquely influence grieving adolescents. Effective responses must go beyond generic mental health awareness, offering grief-informed, context-sensitive, and culturally respectful support.

Grief-Informed Digital Practices

In today's hyperconnected world, grief has become a digital experience. With over 90% of adolescents using social media daily (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), teens—especially the millions orphaned by COVID-19 (Unwin et al., 2022)—are increasingly turning to online platforms to process loss. While these spaces offer connection and visibility, they also expose adolescents to algorithm-driven retraumatization, aesthetic pressure, and emotional invalidation.

Research shows that pandemic-related isolation and screen exposure significantly increased anxiety and depression among adolescents (Loades et al., 2020). Online mourning, while sometimes supportive, can also trigger distress—particularly when grief is stylized, performative, or trivialised (Williams & Merten, 2009). Studies estimate that nearly 40% of bereaved youth experience prolonged or complicated grief, especially in the absence of social support (Hillis et al., 2021).

Despite growing awareness, most platforms still lack grief-sensitive tools. Adolescents need trauma-informed content filters, private mourning options, and school-based digital grief literacy to make online spaces safer—and more emotionally honest—places to heal.



Grieving Under Pressure: Educational Demands and Cultural Expectations Across South Asia

In South Asia, academic success is deeply tied to family honour and future security, often leaving little space for emotional disruption. Adolescents who lost one or both parents during the COVID-19 pandemic are frequently expected to resume academic performance immediately, despite the psychological toll of bereavement. In India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, where entrance exams and national assessments determine life trajectories, the pressure to succeed can eclipse grief entirely.

Neuroscientific research shows that bereavement impairs brain regions essential for learning and self-regulation. Dysregulation of the HPA axis elevates cortisol levels, affecting the

prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and amygdala, leading to impaired memory, attention, and emotional control (Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007; McEwen, 2007; Lupien et al., 2009). Symptoms of prolonged grief, such as insomnia, migraines, and cognitive fatigue, are often pathologised as laziness or lack of discipline in cultures that stigmatise emotional expression.

This disconnect between emotional need and academic expectation has led to severe consequences. In 2022 alone, over 13,000 student suicides were reported in India (NCRB, 2022). Many grieving students are pushed toward emotional withdrawal, self-harm, or suicidal ideation when they are denied space to process loss within rigid educational systems (Nock, 2010). Without grief-informed policies, trauma-sensitive pedagogy, and accessible mental health support, South Asia risks compounding the effects of loss through systemic neglect.

Culturally Sensitive Grief Spaces Online

Digital grief spaces often reflect Western norms—public hashtags, stylised tributes, and visible mourning. For adolescents in collectivist cultures like South Asia, where grief is typically expressed privately or through ritual, this visibility can feel alien or inappropriate (Walter, 2015; Klass & Steffen, 2018). Caught between cultural expectations and digital norms, many struggle to find a way to grieve authentically.

In one study, 64% of bereaved Indian adolescents avoided sharing grief online for fear of judgment (Balakrishnan et al., 2022). Public grief could invite criticism, while silence risked being misunderstood. This cultural mismatch fosters emotional isolation and disenfranchised grief—feelings that are deeply real but socially unsupported (Doka, 2002).

To make digital mourning more inclusive, platforms must embed cultural and contextual nuance. This includes offering semi-private sharing modes, filters by language or ritual style, and broader representations of grieving practices in algorithms. No single mode of mourning fits all. Adolescents must be allowed to grieve in ways that honour both personal pain and cultural belonging.

The Cultural Invisibility of South Asian Adolescent Grief

Despite growing global attention to grief after COVID-19, mainstream psychological literature remains disproportionately rooted in Western, individualistic frameworks, leaving South Asian adolescent grief largely invisible. In collectivist societies like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, parental loss is not just emotional—it destabilises filial duties, social identity, and intergenerational caregiving roles (Verma & Saraswathi, 2002). Adolescents are often expected to suppress their emotions, uphold family responsibilities, and "move on" long before they've processed their trauma.

Yet dominant grief models continue to emphasise emotional disclosure, therapeutic dialogue, and linear recovery norms that frequently contradict South Asian values of stoicism, restraint, and communal resilience (Dwairy, 2006; Corr et al., 2009). This mismatch can lead to pathologising culturally normative behaviours like silence or ritual mourning, reinforcing feelings of marginalisation among grieving youth.

The consequences are far-reaching. When adolescents do not see their realities reflected in psychological frameworks, they may experience disenfranchised grief—mourning that feels

invalidated, socially unsupported, and internally conflicted (Rosenblatt, 2008). This deepens emotional isolation and impedes identity formation during a critical developmental stage.

The COVID-19 crisis has only widened this gap. India was among the hardest-hit nations, contributing significantly to the 10.5 million children who lost a caregiver globally (Hillis et al., 2021; Unwin et al., 2022). Yet empirical research on the psychosocial impact of this loss in South Asian adolescents remains severely limited. Even digital grief spaces reflect Western grieving norms—stylised tributes, hashtags, public disclosure—often excluding or invalidating quieter, ritual-based expressions of sorrow.

Future research must directly address this cultural blind spot. Grief models must expand to include relational and communal frameworks, religious traditions, and local mourning practices. Studies should also interrogate how algorithmic platforms amplify some grief expressions while erasing others. Without a culturally responsive approach, South Asian adolescents—and many others from marginalised regions—will continue to grieve in silence, excluded from both academic recognition and public support.

CONCLUSION

Grief during adolescence is not a private sorrow—it is a public, digital, and culturally shaped experience that remains chronically misunderstood. The COVID-19 pandemic fractured the emotional scaffolding of millions of young people, particularly those who lost parents. As this review shows, grieving in the digital age is both expansive and constricting: social media offers spaces for expression and connection, yet it also promotes stylised mourning, emotional overexposure, and cycles of retraumatization.

For adolescents—especially in cultures where grief is stigmatised and stoicism is prized—this duality is more pronounced. Algorithms built for engagement, not empathy, elevate content that may distort grief into performance or trivialise trauma. Cultural expectations of silence intersect with online cultures of visibility, leaving bereaved youth suspended between conflicting norms.

South Asian adolescents face unique pressures: to grieve quietly, excel academically, and uphold familial duty, often while emotionally unravelling. Yet these tensions reflect a broader, global challenge. Adolescents everywhere are being asked to reconcile traditional mourning practices with platforms that reward speed, aesthetics, and virality.

To respond meaningfully, we must go beyond awareness. Schools must embed grief literacy; digital platforms must design trauma-informed algorithms; and public health systems must expand adolescent mental health access, particularly in under-resourced settings. Crucially, future research must shift its gaze: not only asking if adolescents grieve, but how their grief is mediated, silenced, or distorted by the structures they inhabit.

Supporting adolescent grief in the 21st century demands more than compassion. It requires structural empathy across platforms, classrooms, clinics, and cultures.

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