

## Article

# “Social Media Saved Me”: Exploring the Perceived Impact of Social Media Use During COVID-19 on the Psychological Resilience of Students Transitioning into Higher Education

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic had a global impact on students transitioning into higher education. During quarantine measures, students often turned to social media for connectedness and peer support in an adverse time. The aim of this research was to explore the perceived impact of social media use during COVID-19 on the psychological resilience of students transitioning into higher education. Data were collected via a qualitative online survey completed by 51 students across the United Kingdom. Following a reflexive thematic analysis of the survey data, three themes were generated: (1) A challenging transition: restricted visits, remote learning, and seeking connection. (2) Facing adversity: becoming resilient in a transitional period. (3) A valued resource: social media as a facilitator of resilience. The findings suggest that social media helped students build virtual connections to overcome feelings of isolation during this transition. Several participants perceived their psychological resilience to have increased through developing strategies to regulate their emotional and mental well-being. Nonetheless, some participants believed that their psychological resilience either decreased or remained untouched. Furthermore, it was explicitly argued that social media played a facilitating role in enhancing participants' perceived psychological resilience through operating as a 'coping mechanism', which fostered a sense of community and togetherness amongst like-minded students.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; pandemic; social media; university transition; psychological resilience; higher education; online learning; digital technology

## 1. Introduction

In January 2020, daily life for people around the globe came to an abrupt halt as the World Health Organization declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern due to the ongoing transmission of COVID-19 ([World Health Organization \[WHO\], 2020](#)). Although nations approached and responded to the exponential threat of COVID-19 in diverse ways, most countries adopted a form of quarantine (informally referred to as 'lockdown' measures) to reduce social interaction of all forms ([Burns et al., 2020](#)). Specifically, within the United Kingdom (UK), these quarantine or lockdown measures had a substantial impact on all forms of social life, with the public asked to follow stay-at-home guidance, limit social gatherings, avoid transport and travel, while restricting any face-to-face contact unless necessary ([Gray & Sanders, 2020](#)). One subsection of the UK population who were particularly impacted by COVID-19 was students. Regardless of their level of study (e.g.,



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primary, secondary, further, and higher education), students were significantly affected by institutional closures, the abrupt shift to online learning, and the resulting disruption and loss of education (see [Harmey & Moss, 2023](#); [Khan, 2021](#); [Shah et al., 2020](#)). Indeed, at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been suggested that roughly 1.6 billion young people globally were impacted by the closure of schools and universities, with the most vulnerable learners suffering the most during this period of uncertainty ([United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \[UNESCO\], 2025](#)).

When considering the higher education sector specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic posed severe issues for university students and their ability to access a good quality of education due to the imposed lockdown measures and associated travel constraints ([Burki, 2020](#); [Crawford et al., 2020](#); [Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022](#)). Considerable evidence suggests that these issues, amongst others, enforced by COVID-19, had a detrimental impact on university students' mental health and well-being globally ([Copeland et al., 2021](#)) and locally within the UK ([Savage et al., 2020](#)). Indeed, it has been proposed that students who were in a 'transitional' phase during the pandemic (i.e., those enrolling into university, changing institutions, or moving abroad) potentially experienced these problems more substantially ([Mok et al., 2021](#); [Tsegay et al., 2023](#)). This demonstrates the importance of higher education institutions being more cognisant of how best to support students during this period of adjustment, particularly in the context of a global health crisis ([Pownall et al., 2021](#)).

Due to the disruptions caused by COVID-19, students transitioning into higher education frequently experienced increased feelings of stress and anxiety regarding the shift to online learning ([Patias et al., 2021](#); [Wong Aitken et al., 2024](#)), challenges to building friendships and connections ([Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022](#); [Mok et al., 2021](#)), while lacking a sense of belonging to their place of study ([Lederer et al., 2021](#)). Thus, it has been argued that these factors, intensified by the pandemic, had a damaging effect on university students' perceived psychological resilience ([Jeamjitvibool et al., 2022](#); [Marciano et al., 2022](#)). Although the notion of psychological resilience encompasses a range of diverse definitions, concepts, and theories (see [Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013](#)), it generally refers to a person's ability to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity ([Lee et al., 2024](#); [Luthar et al., 2000](#)). Thus, psychological resilience provides a concept for understanding how university students negotiated social isolation, educational disruption, mental health strain, and financial instability arising from the pandemic when transitioning into higher education.

Previous research has begun to outline how university students struggled to adapt, thrive, and cope during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a reduced sense of psychological resilience (see [Jeamjitvibool et al., 2022](#); [Marciano et al., 2022](#)). Within this body of literature, it is frequently reported that social media use negatively affected the psychological resilience of student populations by diminishing social connectedness ([Lederer et al., 2021](#)), and through doom-scrolling practices ([Price et al., 2022](#)), both of which had a detrimental impact on mental health and well-being ([Draženović et al., 2023](#); [Nails et al., 2023](#); [Patias et al., 2021](#)). However, limited research has explicitly focused on the facilitative role of social media on university students' psychological resilience during this period, especially as they transitioned into higher education within the UK. Hence, it can be argued that within this context (i.e., UK higher education) "social media's role in resilience construction has been poorly understood" ([Xie et al., 2022](#), p. 1), with a need to conceptualise how university students were able to 'bounce forward', both individually and collectively, through enhanced psychological resilience during an unprecedented event ([Houston, 2015](#); [Xie et al., 2022](#)).

Although some empirical work has begun to shed light on the positive impact that social media, online platforms, and social networks have had on student and adult popula-

tions' perceived psychological resilience during the pandemic (see [Michikyan et al., 2023](#); [Perry et al., 2024](#); [Zhen et al., 2021](#)), this research has predominantly drawn upon quantitative methods. While useful, these studies are unlikely to provide a nuanced understanding of how university students experienced their transition into higher education during this critical juncture, explicitly in relation to their engagement with social media and the ways in which this may have influenced their perceived psychological resilience (see [Suadik, 2022](#); [Tremblay et al., 2021](#)).

Consequently, this research project adopted a qualitative methodological approach with an overarching aim to explore the perceived impact of social media use during COVID-19 on the psychological resilience of students transitioning into higher education. To address this broad research aim, this project was guided by three bespoke research questions:

1. How did university students experience the transition into higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did university students perceive their psychological resilience during the transition to higher education amid the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. To what extent did social media facilitate or inhibit university students' perceived psychological resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Paradigmatic Position and Methodological Approach

This research is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which appreciates the influence of culture(s) on the development of different social realities ([Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020](#)). Interpretivism adopts a relativist ontological stance, which assumes that multiple socially constructed realities exist, in addition to a subjectivist epistemology that outlines how knowledge is co-constructed and developed through social interactions ([Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020](#); [Braun & Clarke, 2013](#); [Poucher et al., 2020](#)). Following the paradigmatic assumptions of interpretivism and to ensure methodological coherency ([Poucher et al., 2020](#)), a broad qualitative approach was adopted. Specifically, the use of a qualitative approach helped to understand undergraduate students' experiences of social media use during COVID-19 and the perceived impact it had on their psychological resilience during their transition into higher education.

### 2.2. Data Generation

To generate rich accounts of undergraduate university students' experiences of their transition into higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, a qualitative online survey was utilised ([Braun et al., 2021](#)). In addition to enhanced geographical reach ([Thomas et al., 2024](#)), online surveys are particularly beneficial when looking to explore potentially sensitive topic areas due to increased social comfort and high levels of *felt* anonymity, which can facilitate participant disclosure ([Braun et al., 2021](#)). Moreover, when considering the target sample and their digital literacy (i.e., university students), qualitative online surveys are an advantageous method due to their participant-centred nature (e.g., self-paced, increased participant control), ease of accessibility, and ability to offer a wide-angled lens on the topic of interest ([Braun et al., 2021](#); [Thomas et al., 2024](#)).

The qualitative online survey was designed and administered using Microsoft Forms and was divided into four sections, including both demographic and topic-based questions ([Braun et al., 2021](#)), to ensure an appropriate and accessible survey structure ([Thomas et al., 2024](#)). Before accessing the survey questions, a participant information page was embedded at the beginning of the survey, which outlined the research aim and focus, included completion instructions, explained the intended research benefits, and provided information regarding confidentiality and the withdrawal process. After carefully reading

the participant information page, participants were then able to provide their informed consent and outline their willingness to participate in the research project. Section one of the survey contained demographic questions regarding participants' age, gender, country of residence, ethnicity, and current degree programme, with section two focusing on participants' current and previous (i.e., during the COVID-19 pandemic) social media usage. Finally, sections three and four included six topic-based questions to address the designated research aim and questions, which focused on participants' perceptions and experiences of social media use, the impact of COVID-19 on their university transition, and psychological resilience (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Qualitative online survey topic-based questions.

Questions	
1.	In your opinion, why do you feel that your screen time increased, decreased, or stayed the same, during the COVID-19 lockdown?
2.	What social media platforms did you use most frequently during the COVID-19 lockdown?
3.	In your opinion, how did you feel that the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions had an impact on your education, particularly in your transition into university?
4.	What is your understanding of psychological resilience? Please attempt to answer this question without researching or googling the definition, as we would like to gain an insight into your comprehension of psychological resilience.
5.	What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on your psychological resilience, specifically surrounding your transition into university?
6.	Do you feel that your social media use during the COVID-19 lockdown developed or hindered your psychological resilience? Please explain your reasoning.

### 2.3. Participants, Sampling, and Recruitment

This research project aimed to recruit undergraduate university students from across the UK who had experienced a transition into higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, individuals were eligible to participate in the research if they were over the age of 18 and had transitioned into higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. After obtaining institutional ethical approval, the lead author commenced the process of recruiting participants through disseminating the link to the online survey via their personal social media platforms and emailing potential participants directly. Consequently, the adopted sampling strategy can be defined as *purposive*, which assumes that specific individuals or groups will possess diverse and important views about the topic in question (Campbell et al., 2020). However, elements of convenience-based and snowball sampling strategies were also used to further enhance the size of the sample within the online survey (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Overall, the qualitative online survey obtained responses from 51 participants from across the UK (see Table 2), which was considered appropriate to address the research questions and scope of this study (Braun et al., 2021).

**Table 2.** Participant demographic information.

Demographics	N
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	10
Female	39
Transgender male	1
Transgender female	0
Non-binary	1
Prefer not to say	0
Other	0

Table 2. Cont.

Demographics	N
<b>Age range</b>	
20–24	33
25–29	7
30–34	4
35–39	4
40+	3
<b>Country of residence</b>	
England	40
Scotland	3
Wales	3
Northern Ireland	5
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
White (English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British, Irish, Gypsy, Traveler, Roma, other)	40
Black (Black British, Caribbean, African, other)	2
Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, other)	6
Mixed (White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian, other)	3
<b>Enrolled degree programme</b>	
Bachelor of Arts	13
Bachelor of Science	21
Bachelor of Education	6
Bachelor of Engineering	2
Bachelor of Law	3
Bachelor of Medicine	1
Other	5

#### 2.4. Data Analysis

In ensuring methodological coherence and aligning with the paradigmatic position of this research, a *reflexive* approach to thematic analysis was adopted (Braun et al., 2022; Poucher et al., 2020). Broadly, thematic analysis is a rigorous and theoretically flexible approach that enables the generation and interpretation of patterns (i.e., themes) across datasets, such as those obtained via online surveys (Braun et al., 2021). Specifically, a reflexive approach to thematic analysis emphasises the researcher(s) ongoing role in knowledge production, the importance of theoretical knowingness and transparency, in addition to the notion that codes and themes are analytic *outputs* produced by the researcher(s) (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thus, a reflexive approach to thematic analysis was adopted, which involved iterative engagement through phases of familiarisation, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and developing themes, refining, defining, and naming themes, and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2022).

To begin, the lead author familiarised themselves with the complete survey dataset through reading all responses several times to obtain a broad sense of meaning (Braun et al., 2022). Next, survey responses were inductively coded at both a semantic (surface) and latent (underlying) level, where the lead author organically and recursively attached codes (defined as labels of interest) through their subjective interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Given the recursive nature of coding, codes evolved over time following prolonged engagement with the data and a ‘querying’ on behalf of the lead author (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As an example, codes such as ‘support with isolation’, ‘stealing ideas’, and ‘developing resilience’ were iteratively applied when interpreting this response from Participant 34:

*“People started talking more about working from home and coping with isolation, so maybe I learned a few tricks to stay more resilient”.*

After the ‘creative labour’ of coding (Braun & Clarke, 2019), similar and relevant codes were grouped together to generate initial themes as central meaning-based concepts as opposed to passive entities that merely emerged from the survey dataset (Braun et al., 2022). These generated themes were further refined, defined, and appropriately named to represent “creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Consequently, the adopted reflexive thematic analysis process resulted in the generation of three themes: (1) A challenging transition: restricted visits, remote learning, and seeking connection. (2) Facing adversity: becoming resilient in a transitional period. (3) A valued resource: social media as a facilitator of resilience.

### 2.5. Qualitative Rigour

In assessing the quality and rigour of this work, we draw upon the work of Tracy (2026) and the eight ‘Big-Tent’ criteria for excellent qualitative research. Rather than perceiving the eight components of the ‘Big-Tent’ to be a rigid set of prescriptive guidelines, the criteria offers a set of flexible practices for reflective, ethical, and impactful research (Tracy, 2026). Consequently, we believe the quality of this research should be assessed via Tracy’s (2026) ‘Big-Tent’ criteria, including components such as its worthiness of topic (i.e., this research topic is contemporary and relevant in a digital age), resonance (i.e., the findings can resonate with readers’ experiences through transferability and naturalistic generalisability), significant contribution (i.e., this research provides practical considerations for education providers), and its meaningful coherence (i.e., this research is presented logically and utilises an appropriate research design).

## 3. Results and Discussion

All survey data were subject to a reflexive thematic analysis process, which led to the generation of three themes: (1) A challenging transition: restricted visits, remote learning, and seeking connection. (2) Facing adversity: becoming resilient in a transitional period. (3) A valued resource: social media as a facilitator of resilience. These themes are highlighted below and include a combination of both survey responses and connections to contemporary academic literature to build a strong analytical narrative.

### 3.1. A Challenging Transition: Restricted Visits, Remote Learning, and Seeking Connection

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on all students globally, especially those transitioning between distinct levels of schooling or institutions (Shah et al., 2020; Matsieli & Mutula, 2024; Tsegay et al., 2023). Within the survey data, participants outlined how they experienced a challenging and disruptive transition into higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Issues began to arise before students enrolled in a higher education course due to the limited opportunities to attend open days and visit university campuses, with many students forced to attend online alternatives in search of information.

*I couldn’t visit the universities in person or even see the local area/city/town due to not being able to travel or travel outside of an area with a different “level” of risk. I had to do it all online which was hard to get a feel for the place. (Participant 4)*

*My transition to university felt like it was half done. I didn’t get the full experience in sixth form. Because of this, I couldn’t attend any university open days as very few were being held. My interviews for all the universities I applied to were online. This whole ‘introduction’ to university didn’t feel as in-depth as it should have been. (Participant 6)*

*I never got to go to any open days, so when I first moved to university it was my first time seeing the campus, which was a bit weird. Online teaching was still a big thing in my first year so that also had an impact. (Participant 11)*

Attending virtual open days and university introductions as opposed to in-person events resulted in students believing they missed out on a subjective sense of ‘feel’ regarding what the university campus was like and whether they could see themselves studying at that specific institution. Indeed, students feeling a sense of connection and belonging is considered especially important during transitional phases to support retention and facilitate identity formation (Lederer et al., 2021; Pownall et al., 2021). As such, compared to cohorts from previous years, some participants felt disadvantaged as they approached higher education.

*I couldn't attend university fairs to speak to a range of institutions and have a wider idea of where was available to me. I couldn't experience open days to get an idea for what university life would be like at certain institutions as previous years had. (Participant 51)*

In addition to attending university open days virtually, participants suggested that their transition to higher education was difficult and required an adjustment to negotiate online learning environments. Aligning with existing research (e.g., Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022; Nails et al., 2023; Patias et al., 2021), the participants in this study explained how the COVID-19-enforced transition to online learning within higher education significantly disrupted their university experience, negatively impacting upon students’ motivation, well-being, and academic performance.

*I started at the University of \*\*\*\*\* studying BA Musical Theatre. Most lessons were online and trying to do ballet over Zoom was really hard, especially as I had trained for years to get to this point. I didn't get a full experience of university—no freshers etc. I ended up falling out of love with dance and I changed degree, moved to \*\*\*\*\* as it's closer to home. (Participant 9)*

*It really damaged my motivation for lectures and seminars because I wasn't used to in person stuff anymore. I ended up missing a lot of my stuff and it ruined a lot of my university experience due to being set up badly. (Participant 12)*

Participants alluded to how the online and remote nature of higher education during this period necessitated higher levels of self-directed study (Matsieli & Mutula, 2024), alongside feelings of disconnection and seclusion from their fellow peers due to restricted interactions (Mok et al., 2021; Nails et al., 2023).

*I was a foundation course student at \*\*\*\*\* during COVID-19. Almost every subject went online, and I couldn't meet my classmates until I finished my course. There was no interaction and socialisation with other students. (Participant 23)*

*I had to work independently and found it isolating. I had support from my educators through email, however, I felt like I was completing the degree on my own. (Participant 44)*

This lack of social connection with students on the same degree programme further enforced the notion of independent study while contributing to a build-up of social anxiety and pressure to make friends when in-person interactions were eventually permitted (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022; Matsieli & Mutula, 2024). Moreover, as suggested by Pei et al. (2024), it is often harder to foster a sense of community and friendship within online education environments, with participants referring to the absence of a traditional ‘university life’, which impeded their higher education experience and expectations.

*Being online for so long did make me more nervous to then come back to face-to-face learning and it also heightened the social pressure of meeting new peers. (Participant 14)*

*The first two years of university were hard because I had no social circle due to almost all lectures being online. I moved abroad to university and found the experience very isolating and challenging for my mental health. . . Being in third year now, it is tough, because I finally built a close circle of friends, just as we are all about to spread out again. I feel like I missed out on what other people really mean when they say university life. (Participant 41)*

*Definitely felt the impact of no face-to-face teaching. I did not feel connected with the course at all until my second year really. I found it difficult to make friends due to the lockdown, which meant I didn't have groups to attend the library with and hence would do a lot of my studying alone. (Participant 50)*

Yet, in a bid to overcome the absence of in-person contact caused by enforced online learning and the COVID-19 restrictions, social media was perceived to be a mechanism for building connections virtually to help negotiate the inherent and shared transitional challenges students were encountering, such as feelings of isolation and anxiety (Governale et al., 2024).

*But as everyone was anxious, I think we all tried hard to get to know people living in the same accommodation before we got there, we used social media for this. (Participant 4)*

*My old university encouraged us to join Facebook groups, and I was in an Instagram group chat for my old course so maybe they helped ease me into things a little. (Participant 13)*

Thus, during this transitional period, social media was used to increase students' feelings of connectedness through online socialising with peers (Michikyan et al., 2023), helping to reduce stress and foster a sense of collectiveness to support each other through the challenges that COVID-19 produced (Zhen et al., 2021).

### 3.2. Facing Adversity: Becoming Resilient in a Transitional Period

Resilience and, specifically, the notion of psychological resilience, encompasses an array of definitions, concepts, and theories (see Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Often conceptualised as either a trait or process, resilience is generally perceived to be an individual's ability to adapt and thrive in the face of challenge or adversity (Lee et al., 2024; Luthar et al., 2000). Within the context of this research, the COVID-19 pandemic can be considered a state of adversity due to the resulting negative life circumstances that resulted in adjustment difficulties for individuals (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000), with examples including social isolation, education disruption, mental health strain, and financial instability. Thus, when reflecting on their transition to higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, several participants alluded to how they believed that their psychological resilience had increased during this period from having to negotiate these adjustment difficulties.

*I think in a way it made me more independent and determined to get into university and to settle and do well. I grew confidence in my competency and ability by being able to work independently at home during the pandemic. (Participant 14)*

*Became more psychologically resilient as I had to see the positive in what was going on, I couldn't dwell on the experiences I was missing out on. (Participant 24)*

*It made me more resilient, having to deal with things out of your control can be frustrating but if you can't change it then you might as well get on with it as well as possible. (Participant 48)*

Participants in this instance referred to (psychological) resilience as something that was enhanced during the pandemic (i.e., as a process) rather than being a stable and inherent trait they possessed (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Consequently, psychological resilience was

generally perceived to be a “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543). Specifically, it was suggested by participants that their challenging transition into higher education enabled them to develop several coping strategies to manage their emotional and mental well-being, which is likely to support them when facing adverse situations in the future (see Celbis et al., 2025).

*My psychological resilience was developed in lockdown. I found myself problem-solving more often and dealing with any emotions I had by myself because I couldn't go out and see my friends to relieve these emotions. Because I had to sort of 'deal' with my emotions by 'myself', I built strategies of how to cope/manage feelings. Therefore, in this way, I developed my psychological resilience. (Participant 6)*

*I think it allowed me to understand loneliness is necessary in some parts of life. The transition of being physically isolated during COVID to being alone at the beginning of university allowed me to not feel sad when I experienced it. (Participant 17)*

*I feel it made me more resilient in some ways. . . The pandemic gave me an insight into my mental well-being and how I can take care of myself better, giving me a huge boost in my confidence and my ability to move 270 miles away from home and be entirely independent, even when things went wrong. I could handle them better than I would have been able to if COVID had not happened. (Participant 28)*

In the face of adversity, the findings suggest that the difficult transition participants experienced into higher education functioned as an opportunity to build psychological resilience through increased self-awareness and stress management techniques, in addition to engagement with positive framing (Celbis et al., 2025; Okeke-Uzodike & Ngo Henha, 2025). Yet, in recognising psychological resilience as a process that fluctuates temporally (Luthar et al., 2000), it is unsurprising to note that some participants perceived their psychological resilience as having decreased and being negatively impacted during the pandemic (see Jeamjitvibool et al., 2022).

*I would say I lacked psychological resilience in the pandemic. I became changed in my mental health and confidence. This made my transition hard and lonely as I found it hard to reach out and make friends. (Participant 26)*

*I actually found it had a negative impact on my psychological resilience. I found the change very hard to manage and hence sheltered myself from a lot of new situations. (Participant 50)*

Moreover, some participants suggested that their psychological resilience was not impacted or changed at all by the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, both Participants 6 and 51 demonstrated proactivity and what can be considered characteristics of ‘robust resilience’, where individuals maintain their well-being when under pressure (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

*In relation to my transition to university, my psychological resilience was never really a concern for me. I have always had good/stable psychological resilience. There were times I was worried about my transition to university, but I don't think those worries deviated from 'normal' concerns a student has before starting university. I know most of the time how to manage situations that challenge my psychological resilience. (Participant 6)*

*COVID-19 had minimal effect on my psychological resilience. Whilst it made my decision on whether to go university or not and which university to go to a lot harder, I ultimately found ways around it. I took every opportunity to email universities for as much information as possible, attend online virtual tours, and visit the campuses myself to just walk around and get a good idea of the surroundings. (Participant 51)*

Although an ill-defined term, in short, psychological resilience can be used to explain how an individual's personal qualities can be used to adapt, withstand, and manage pressure during adversity (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Subsequently, the findings suggest that in the face of strong adversity, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and needing to negotiate a transition into higher education (Davydov et al., 2010), for some students, they perceived their psychological resilience to have increased, thus leading to positive adaptations (see Celbis et al., 2025; Killgore et al., 2020; Luthar et al., 2000; Ross et al., 2024). However, in acknowledging the idiosyncratic nature of psychological resilience, which as a process can fluctuate temporally (Luthar et al., 2000), in some examples, participants believed their psychological resilience either decreased or remained untouched during the pandemic (see Jeamjitvibool et al., 2022).

### 3.3. A Valued Resource: Social Media as a Facilitator of Resilience

Psychological resilience encapsulates the personal attributes and dispositions, alongside access to social resources, that can positively impact upon adverse situations and outcomes (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Recent research into resilience studies has progressed from describing individual traits to instead focusing on exploring the social interactions between individuals and their personal, community, and cultural contexts (Pasha et al., 2025). Consequently, social networking sites and social media platforms can be considered a social resource that individuals can draw upon during adverse times (Wang et al., 2025). Indeed, for Participant 21, social media platforms enabled communication with friends to continue during the pandemic, which had a positive impact on their perceived psychological resilience.

*Developed [psychological resilience], we were able to communicate with each other [via social media] and we were all in a similar situation, so everyone was communicating and helping each other. (Participant 21)*

Research suggests that social media, in addition to engagement with online platforms, can play a mediating role between social support and psychological resilience during traumatic periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Asghar et al., 2021). Social networking sites and online community groups provide individuals with social and emotional support, access to informational resources, while normalising perceived stigmas (e.g., mental health), which can help contribute to a shared sense of collective resilience (see Ahluwalia et al., 2025; Labrague, 2021; Suadik, 2022). This sense of collective resilience and resonating with others' experiences was emphasised by participants, who alluded to the reassuring nature of storytelling, in addition to accessing bespoke support and guidance (see Szeto et al., 2024).

*Developed, definitely [psychological resilience]. Without social media during the pandemic, I would have had a much worse time. And during that time a lot of people on social media were talking about mental health, mental well-being, and having huge open discussions on how to care for yourself mentally. Spending hours locked up with only those kinds of discussions to keep me occupied taught me a lot about myself, how to look after myself mentally, and regulate my emotions in many different situations. (Participant 28)*

*The use of social media was somehow reassuring seeing others being in the same situation and sometimes struggling. On the other hand, more light-hearted content distracted thoughts about the uncertainty during lockdown. (Participant 32)*

*I think it helped, to be honest [psychological resilience]. I sought out mental health pages, and official accounts from crisis organisations, and also used social media to get back into fitness and motivating myself to give recovery a chance. I spent too much time on social*

*media, but it was definitely healthier than other behaviours I would have resided to at that time. (Participant 41)*

The emotional and social support obtained from social networking sites and social media platforms appeared to function effectively in alleviating feelings of loneliness and isolation, while facilitating the development of participants perceived psychological resilience. During times of crisis, such as the pandemic, active engagement on social media and possessing strong personal networks might help to encourage collective resiliency against perceived challenges individuals were facing (Perry et al., 2024; Szeto et al., 2024). As such, both Participants 43 and 51 disclosed how they actively engaged with social media platforms such as TikTok to seek designated support from online communities as a ‘coping mechanism’ to foster resilience (Labrague, 2021; Suadik, 2022; Zhen et al., 2021).

*I believe that the use of social media definitely developed my resilience as I found that specific platforms such as TikTok represented people such as myself, a mature student. I also sought support through the online trans community, social media saved me. (Participant 43)*

*Developed [psychological resilience]. I believe social media helped not only me but the population to adapt to the new way of life lockdown and COVID-19 presented us with and was used as a coping mechanism. (Participant 51)*

These findings align with the work of George et al. (2023), who argue that during the pandemic, the use of social media helped to facilitate effective information exchange while fostering a sense of community, ultimately producing an online environment that is conducive to prosocial behaviour and enhancing perceived resilience. The notion of fostering ‘community resilience’ is said to reflect an individual’s response alongside networked social support within a community (in person or virtual) when dealing with natural disasters and traumatic experiences (Xie et al., 2022). For example, Xie et al. (2022, p. 1) have argued that using social media has “become a central part of emergency responses and resilience construction with timely information exchange and promotion of connectedness for social support”. Thus, several participants referred to the importance of a community spirit through shared experiences to help enhance a collective sense of resilience.

*I found a sense of community online which I think helped foster my belief that I could cope which in turn showed me I could manage things which increased my resilience. (Participant 4)*

*I think social media developed my resilience because of the community spirit that was circulating online. We were in this together and we were ready to get out of this together too. (Participant 25)*

In aligning with the work of Xie et al. (2022), these findings further demonstrate the value and importance of using social media as a community-based coping mechanism during adverse times. Moreover, some similarities here can be made to research by Park et al. (2021), who found that during COVID-19, for adults, their perceived sense of emotional support (i.e., the subjective quality of support they felt) more positively enhanced their mental health and well-being, in comparison to the quantity they received. Indeed, social media engagement permits individuals to actively source platforms, communities, and resources tailored to their personal needs and desires to facilitate an enhanced sense of resilience. Nonetheless, it is important to note that although the findings of this research demonstrate how social media use acted as a facilitator of psychological resilience during the pandemic, evidence does suggest that in some samples of youth and young adults, frequent exposure to COVID-19-related information and problematic social media use

can lead to negative emotional impacts and a reduced sense of resilience (see [Marciano et al., 2022](#)).

#### 4. Concluding Thoughts

The aim of this research was to explore the perceived impact of social media use during COVID-19 on the psychological resilience of students transitioning into higher education. In summary, the findings of this research contribute to the growing understanding that social media supported students in bolstering their well-being and resilience during the pandemic, enhancing their ability to negotiate challenges during a transitional period (see [Ahluwalia et al., 2025](#); [Celbis et al., 2025](#); [Labrague, 2021](#); [Szeto et al., 2024](#)). This study adds to this contemporary body of literature by capturing UK-based students' unmediated perspectives and insight into their personal experiences as they transitioned into higher education during the global pandemic.

The findings highlight that, although this transition proved challenging due to an inability to attend open days and campus visits, coupled with an abrupt move to online learning, which limited peer interaction, social media was perceived to be a mechanism for building connections virtually to overcome feelings of isolation and anxiety ([Zhen et al., 2021](#)). When reflecting on this transition, several participants perceived their psychological resilience to have increased during this period, through developing specific strategies to regulate their emotional and mental well-being ([Celbis et al., 2025](#); [Killgore et al., 2020](#); [Ross et al., 2024](#)). However, in viewing psychological resilience as a temporal process ([Luthar et al., 2000](#)), some participants believed their psychological resilience either decreased or remained untouched during the pandemic (see [Jeamjitvibool et al., 2022](#)). Finally, it was explicitly argued that social media played a facilitating role in enhancing participants perceived psychological resilience during this transition by providing designated support as a 'coping mechanism' which fostered a sense of community and togetherness ([Labrague, 2021](#); [Suadik, 2022](#)).

In aligning with recent scholarly work (e.g., [George et al., 2023](#); [Xie et al., 2022](#)), on a practical level, these findings suggest that during adverse times (i.e., transitioning into higher education during a global pandemic), social media and online communities can be perceived as supportive mechanisms to enhance engagement and facilitate resilience. Specifically, educational organisations (e.g., schools, universities, charities, alternative providers) may wish to reflect upon how online platforms might equip students with the skills to strengthen their psychological resilience, as the findings emphasise how leveraging social media, not only as a form of communication but as a strategic resource, can help to foster resilience, support student well-being, and facilitate smooth transitions into higher education. Although this research has provided an indication of how social media can positively enhance psychological resilience, some limitations must be acknowledged.

Firstly, only one research method was used, which relies upon self-report data (i.e., qualitative online surveys). Future research should consider the use of multiple qualitative and/or quantitative methods conducted longitudinally to further understand the role of social media and alternative online platforms in facilitating psychological resilience during adverse times. For example, an exploration into the longitudinal development of resilience across postgraduate and professional life could provide insight into how students adapt to ongoing life challenges and whether social media coping strategies have a prolonged effect. Indeed, such research could identify factors that strengthen or hinder resilience beyond the undergraduate context, informing interventions that support lifelong psychological well-being. Furthermore, the participant sample within this research was skewed toward younger adults (65% aged 20–24) who identified as female (77%), from predominantly a white (i.e., English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British, Irish,

Gypsy, Traveler, Roma, any other) ethnic background (79%). Therefore, this creates a future research opportunity to incorporate the perspectives and experiences of more diverse participant demographics to ensure a comprehensive understanding of resilience across varied ages, genders, and ethnicities.

Ultimately, the findings from this research demonstrate the wide potential of social media, not just as a communication tool, but as a resource that can be used to strengthen psychological resilience and equip learners with tools to navigate obstacles during adverse times. Thus, from broad societal, academic, and policy perspectives, this is significant as it highlights the responsibility of educational institutions to incorporate digital resilience strategies and training, which help students to understand and navigate challenges, ensuring resources and programmes are easily accessible. This can better prepare students to not only cope with the demands of being digitally connected, but to also thrive in contemporary workplaces and society by being adaptable and resilient individuals.

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