

# Creativity In Crisis: The Impact Of Creative Engagements On The Wellbeing Of Adolescents During Covid-19 Lockdown

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## **Abstract:**

The aim of this research paper is to explore the relationship between creative activities undertaken by adolescents during the COVID-19 lockdown period and their impact on their overall well-being. The participants' ages ranged from 13 to 18 years. The methodology focused on qualitative data collected through a cross-sectional survey and unstructured interviews.

Wellbeing was considered through self-report measures focusing on various dimensions such as self-confidence, motivation, and social functioning. Participants were given a scale ranging from 1-5 (with descriptions for each option) and asked to choose one option. This was done in order to gauge the difference in these dimensions at various points before and after the lockdown. The findings reflected the research in the field, with a clear positive relationship between creative activities and well-being.

The sustenance of these activities post-lockdown was found to be positive. Many participants considered the online mode of education/work and the subsequent time and freedom it provided to be the driving force behind their heightened engagement in these activities. The reversal of these conditions led to less time spent on these activities as compared to the lockdown period, but higher levels of engagement compared to the levels prior to the lockdown.

Participants who engaged in vocal or instrumental music showed higher scores in fields such as time management and optimism for the future. Similarly, engagement in artistic activities such as painting and drawing displayed higher scores of self-esteems and eustress. Those who participated in creative writing reported higher levels of self-confidence and more positive social connections. Finally, those who engaged in athletics reported an increased development of self-identity as well as an overall increase in motivation.

The findings of this study highlight the need for a holistic approach in educational spaces that acknowledges and supports a range of creative activities in order to cater to the diverse needs of adolescents to learn, change and grow. Programs that inculcate creative expression (such as musical training, art therapy and creative writing programs) are highly beneficial to youth in educational settings and must be implemented in order to promote their positive well-being.

**Keywords:** Creativity, lockdown, stress, wellbeing, COVID-19

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## **I. Introduction**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures on the mental well-being of adolescents has been a subject of growing concern in recent research. (Ma et al., 2021). Numerous studies have highlighted the negative psychological effects experienced by adolescents during the lockdown, including increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. (Scapatucci et al., 2022).

The youth of India exhibit a greater risk of developing psychological distress, especially considering the various factors of the epidemic influencing their overall well-being. (Deb et al., 2023). India's population consists of a staggering 27.5% of individuals from the range of 15 to 29 years, and according to the National Crime Records Bureau, one-third of all suicides in the country in 2020 were among the youth. The main stressors included the disruption in routines, lack of financial stability, and loss of social and educational opportunities. In India, remote learning opportunities were only accessible to 60% of students in school, while 80% of students reported that they learned significantly less through the online medium of education than in physical classes

according to a report by UNICEF in 2021. The loss of opportunities to learn, expand social networks and interact with peers had a significant negative impact on the well-being of adolescents in India.

The primary motivation for conducting this study was to find the most effective method of coping with the stress faced by Indian youth due to the lockdown, as research targeting this particular demographic has been scarce.

Creative activities have often been linked to the alleviation of stress, and lowered symptoms of anxiety and depression (Fancourt et al., 2019). A longitudinal study by Stuckey & Nobel (2010) demonstrated that participation in visual arts activities positively influenced subjective well-being, leading to increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions. In educational and workspaces, tasks that involve mechanical rote learning are being slowly replaced with the application of contextual creativity. Creative activities also provide an outlet for stress management and self-expression.

The aim of this study is primarily to research the role of creative engagements in improving the mental well-being of adolescents in India during the lockdown. It aims to explore the impact of specific activities on unique aspects of wellbeing while also tracking the sustenance of the activities taken up during the lockdown to gauge the overall impact on creativity.

## **II. Literature Review**

The pandemic brought about unprecedented challenges including strict lockdown measures that profoundly impacted adolescents' mental health. In response to these stressors, creative activities emerged as coping mechanisms. They offered avenues for emotional expression, stress reduction, and social engagement. This literature review explores the impact of creative activities on the mental well-being of adolescents during the lockdown. The review aims to synthesise existing research to understand the unique role of creative pursuits in fostering adolescent mental well-being and to identify gaps for further investigation.

The strategy utilised was a comprehensive search of academic databases (including PubMed, Google Scholar and ScienceDirect) conducted using keywords such as "creative activities", "mental well-being", "adolescents," "India," and "COVID-19 lockdown." Studies published between January 2020 and July 2023 were utilised to capture the range of research on the topic.

Several studies have explored the relationship between creative activities and mental well-being during the lockdown, providing valuable insights into the Indian context. Music, art, and creative writing emerged as prominent creative outlets with potential positive impacts on adolescent mental health.

Research by Ferreri et al. (2021) found that music engagement positively influenced emotional regulation and reduced anxiety levels. Music served as a source of comfort and distraction during times of distress. Additionally, a study by Levstek et al. (2021) highlighted those adolescents who participated in virtual music sessions reported reduced feelings of isolation.

A study by Jin & Ye (2022) demonstrated the beneficial effects of art engagement on self-efficacy. Adolescents who participated in virtual art workshops showed increased self-confidence and resilience, as art served as a form of self-expression and emotional release.

Additionally, creative writing interventions were associated with improved self-esteem and boosted memory, according to researchers at Bolton University. Adolescents who engaged in expressive writing reported reduced stress levels and increased positive affect during the lockdown. Moreover, participation in sports and athletics is found to be beneficial to psychological well-being by boosting self-esteem and life satisfaction and reducing stress (Eather et al., 2023).

While existing research offers promising evidence of the positive impact of creative activities on adolescent mental well-being in India during the lockdown, several gaps warrant further exploration. The literature predominantly focuses on virtual creative activities, raising questions about the accessibility and inclusivity of such interventions, particularly for vulnerable populations with limited digital resources. Furthermore, the long-term sustenance of creative engagement beyond the lockdown remains underexplored. The Indian subcontinent also remains a topic of interest in terms of mechanisms to support and improve well-being.

Future research should address the aforementioned gaps and examine the effectiveness of creative activities in diverse settings, including rural areas and underprivileged communities. Longitudinal studies are required to investigate the sustained impact of creative pursuits on adolescent mental well-being and understand how the effects of the pandemic evolve over time. Additionally, exploring the potential cultural influences on creative activities and mental well-being in India would offer a deeper understanding of the relationship between them.

The literature review demonstrates the significant potential of creative activities in fostering adolescent mental well-being during the COVID-19 lockdown in India. Music, art, athletics and creative writing emerged as valuable contributors to positive well-being. However, further research is needed to develop inclusive programs and assess the sustained impact of creative engagement on mental health beyond the pandemic. This review

informs future research and practice, emphasising the importance of integrating creative activities into mental health interventions for Indian adolescents.

### III. Methodology

This research utilised a mixed methodology which consisted of both interviews and a small-scale cross-sectional survey. It involved using a qualitative self-report design to explore the relationship between creative activities engaged during the lockdown and participants' overall well-being before and after the lockdown period.

(n = 54) The participants were asked to describe all the creative activities they had taken up during the lockdown period, and subsequently asked to describe how it affected their wellbeing in a few lines.

For the measurement of mental well-being, a perspective by Ryff (1989; 2013) was taken up; consisting of six parts: A belief that life has meaning, a sense of purpose, self-development and growth, social connections, a positive self-concept and a belief in one's ability to overcome challenges. The scale created was based on the Warwick - Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS). Participants were encouraged to reflect on these aspects of well-being in 2 phases: Before the lockdown and after it. Questions based on each of these aspects were posed to participants, on a scale of 1-5.

To measure the sustenance of activities, participants were asked to describe their levels of engagement before, during and after lockdown with the categories 'Low', 'Medium' and 'High' wherein 'Low' was defined as 1-4 hours spent per week on the activity, 'Medium' was 5-10 hours and 'High' was 11-20. The categories were then given mean values of 2.5 hours, 7.5 hours and 15.5 hours respectively in order to calculate the total scores for each activity before lockdown, during and after lockdown. The aggregate scores, (the sum of the hours spent by the participants) were then analysed to form conclusions.

The instructions given to participants were concise and clear. All participants were informed that their responses would be confidential and used strictly for research purposes.

The responses from open-ended questions were analysed using a rudimentary form of thematic analysis which involved a process of identifying patterns and relationships within the dataset obtained. The other questions were scored in the context of the activity chosen and the range of responses. See Appendix A.

The sample consisted of 54 participants, aged 13 to 18 years who had experienced the COVID-19 lockdown period. These participants were mostly localised to India and were contacted to fill out the survey securely and electronically.

### IV. Results

The results of the survey confirmed the hypothesis: that engagement in creative activities had a positive relationship with mental well-being during the lockdown period. Those who reported higher participation in certain activities displayed unique effects on different aspects of well-being.

There were several activities detailed by the participants but 4 main clusters were found to contain prominent themes and significant connections: Music, art, creative writing and athletics.

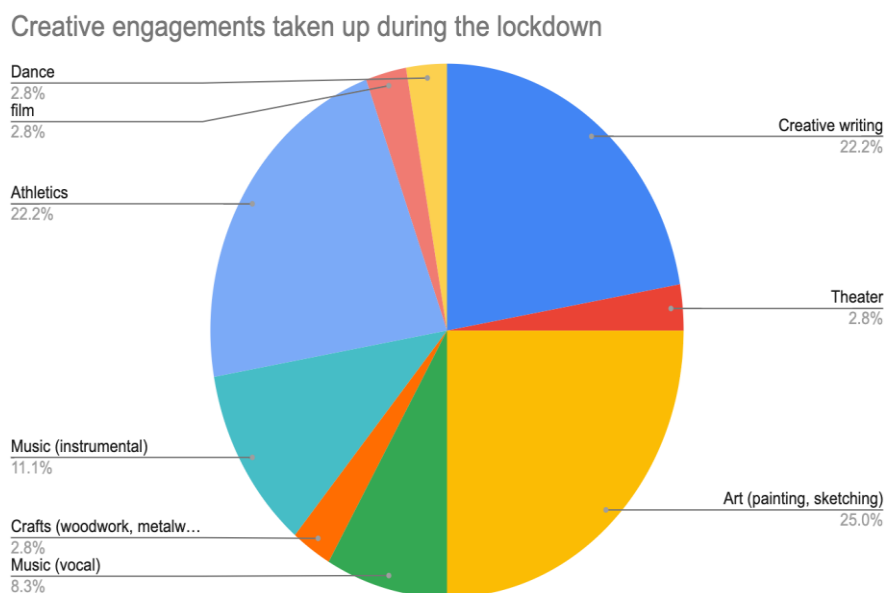
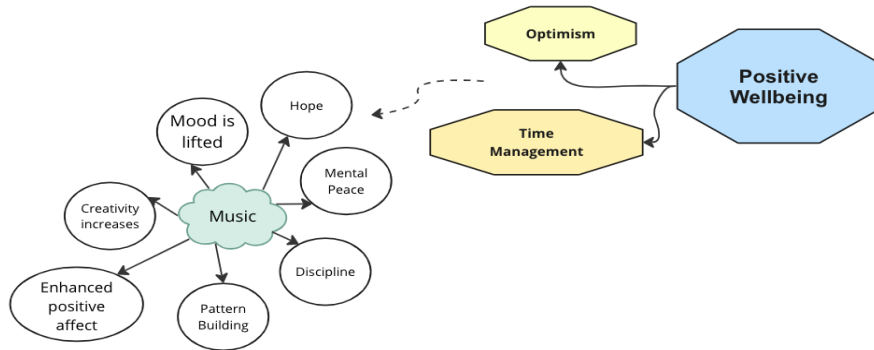


Figure 1: Pie Chart of various Creative Engagements taken up during the Lockdown

Other reported activities such as gardening, theatre and dance displayed an increase in overall well-being, with no specific components displaying unique impacts.

*Music*

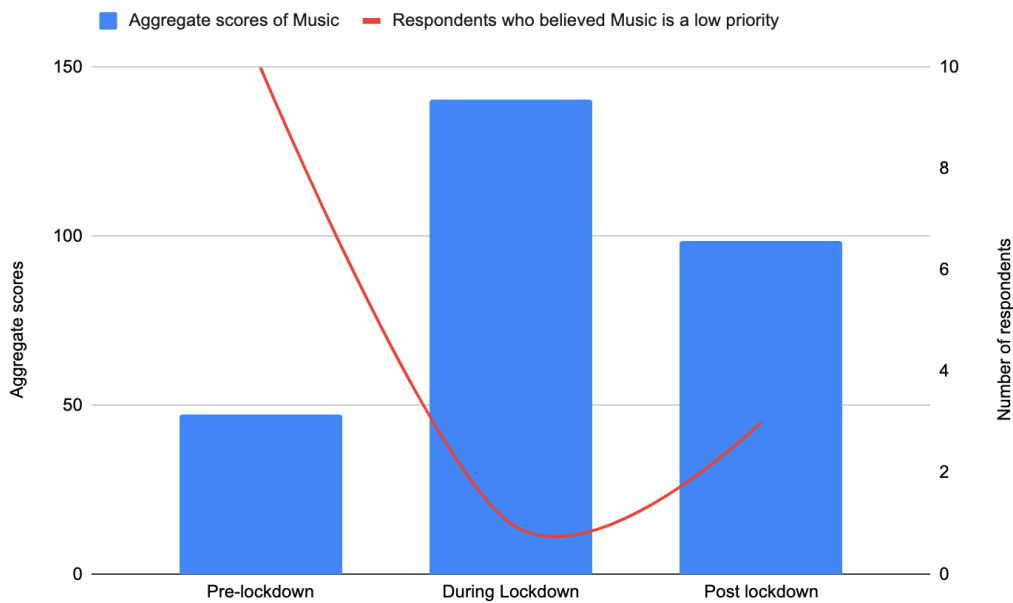
Engagement in music, both vocal and instrumental, was associated with improved time management skills and optimism. There were 13 respondents who provided qualitative responses which were analysed for themes. Overall, the respondents reported the development of optimism and hope about their lives, as well as increased time management abilities as effects of their engagement in music. The sub-themes found were a lift in mood, enhanced positive affect, the building of patterns in everyday life, an increase in general creativity, a sense of mental peace and the inculcation of discipline.



**Figure 2: Visualisation of the Effect of Music on Overall Well-being**

Music displayed generally lower levels of engagement prior to the lockdown, conveying that a majority of participants considered it a lower priority in their lives (aggregate score of 47.5). During the lockdown, the rates of engagement skyrocketed (aggregate score of 140.5) and after the lockdown, rates reduced. However, the levels of engagement were still high compared to pre-lockdown levels (aggregate score 98.5). This indicates that there was a positive impact on the longevity of the activity.

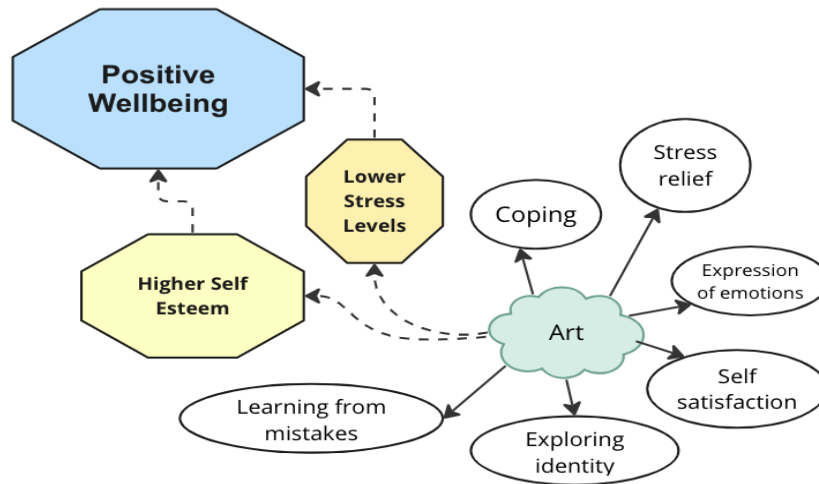
The number of respondents who considered it a low priority (they spent only 1-4 hours on it per week) was highest in the pre-lockdown period (77%). This number declined sharply during the lockdown (7.6%) but increased very marginally once the lockdown had been lifted (23%).



**Figure 3: Visualisation of the Change in Respondents' Engagement with Music**

**Art**

Those who partook in art-related activities (11 participants) reported enhanced self-esteem and reduced stress levels as the broadest themes. The sub-themes included feelings of self-satisfaction, the ability to learn from mistakes, expressing emotions and exploring identity.



**Figure 4: Visualisation of the Effect of Art on Overall Well-being**

Prior to the lockdown, participants spent less time on art (aggregate score of 45). During the lockdown showed higher engagement (aggregate score of 125). Post-lockdown, these rates were reduced. The engagement was still higher compared to pre-lockdown levels (aggregate value 68), but not the relative increase in engagement before and after lockdown was lesser compared to the findings in music. This indicates that there was a positive impact on the longevity of the activity.

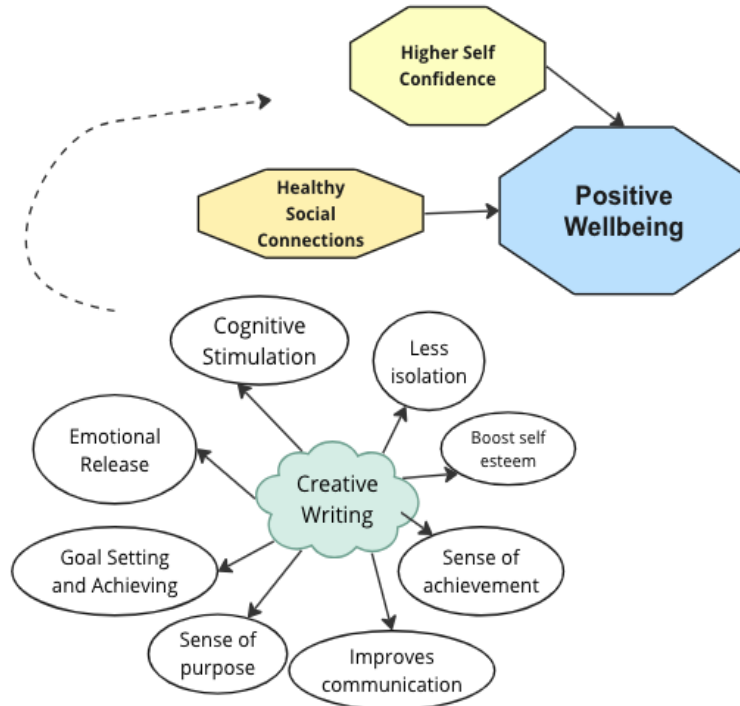


**Figure 5: Visualisation of the Change in Respondents' Engagement with Art**

The number of respondents who considered it a low priority (they spent only 1-4 hours on it per week) was highest in the pre-lockdown period (75%). This declined dramatically during the lockdown (8%) but increased marginally once the lockdown had been lifted (25%). Again, we find a positive impact in the levels of engagement of the activity.

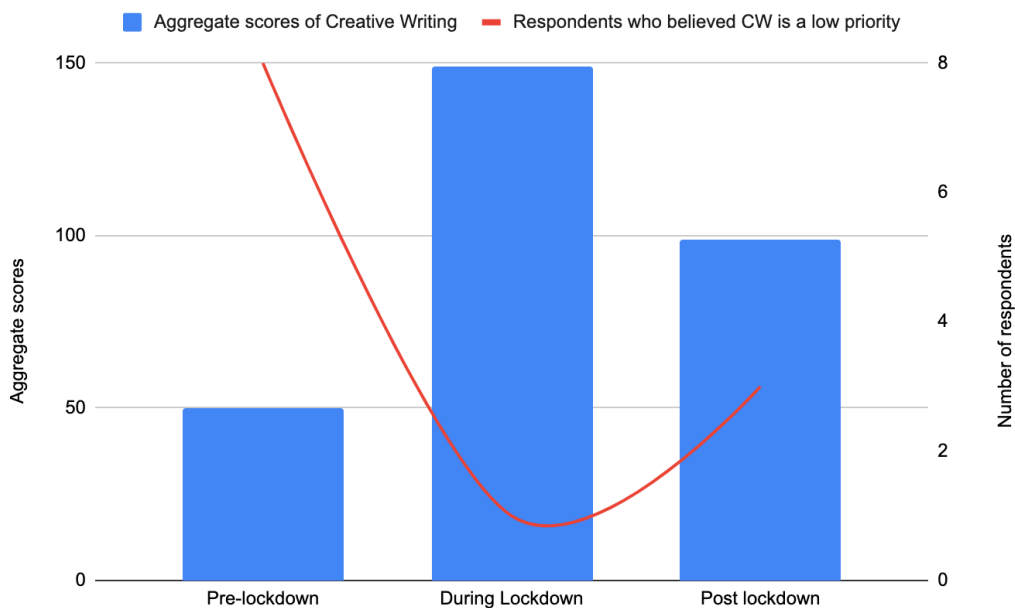
*Creative Writing*

Creative writing demonstrated a positive influence on self-confidence and social connection, as reported by 12 participants. The sub-themes were cognitive stimulation, emotional release, lesser levels of isolation, boosted self-esteem, improving communication, emotional release, a sense of achievement and purpose, and improved goal setting and achieving.



**Figure 6: Visualisation of the Effect of Creative Writing on Overall Well-being**

Creative writing was fairly underexplored prior to the lockdown (aggregate score of 50). Engagement rose rapidly during the lockdown (aggregate score of 149). Post-lockdown, these rates fell. The engagement was still higher compared to pre-lockdown levels (aggregate score 99), and the relative increase in engagement before and after lockdown was similar to the findings in music.

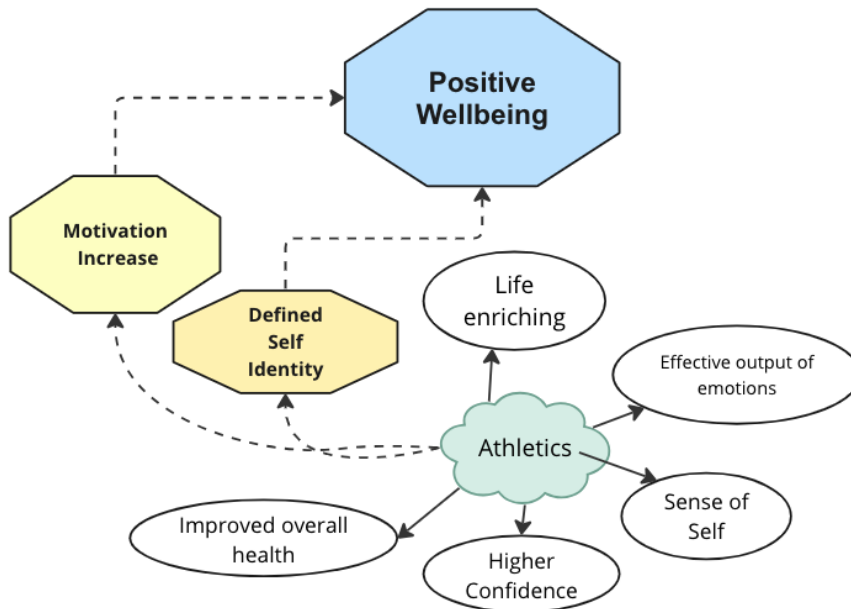


**Figure 7: Visualisation of the Change in Respondents' Engagement with Creative Writing**

The number of respondents who considered it a low priority (they spent only 1-4 hours on it per week) was highest in the pre-lockdown period (67%). This declined dramatically during the lockdown (8.33%) but increased marginally once the lockdown had been lifted (25%). Again, we find a positive impact in the levels of engagement of the activity.

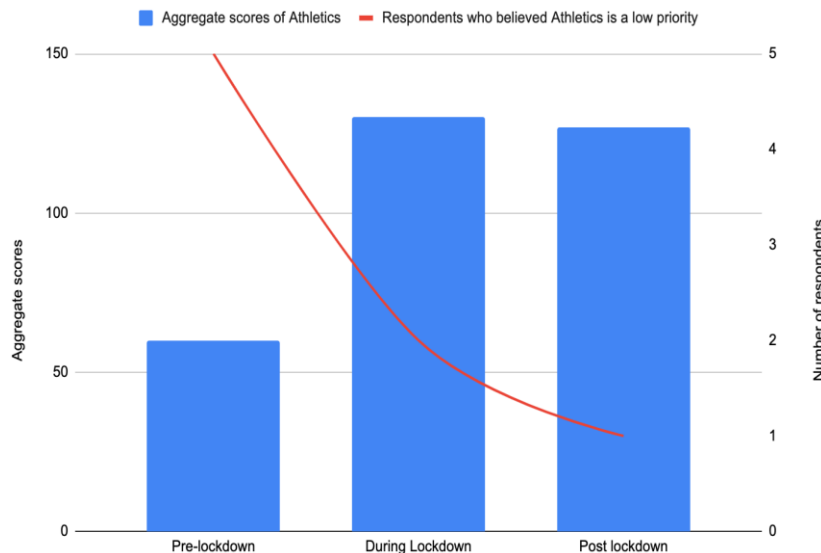
*Athletics*

Participants who had listed athletics as their activity of choice reported a marked increase in motivation as well as a better-defined self-identity. The sub-themes included higher confidence levels, an overall improvement in health, effective emotional output, and enrichment of life.



**Figure 8: Visualisation of the Effect of Athletics on Overall Well-being**

Prior to the lockdown, participants spent less time on art (aggregate score of 35). During the lockdown, many adolescents discovered its effectiveness as a coping mechanism leading to higher engagement (aggregate score of 75). Post-lockdown, these rates were reduced. The engagement was still higher compared to pre-lockdown levels (aggregate score 79), but not the relative increase in engagement before and after lockdown was lesser compared to the findings in music. This indicates that there was a positive impact on the longevity of the activity.



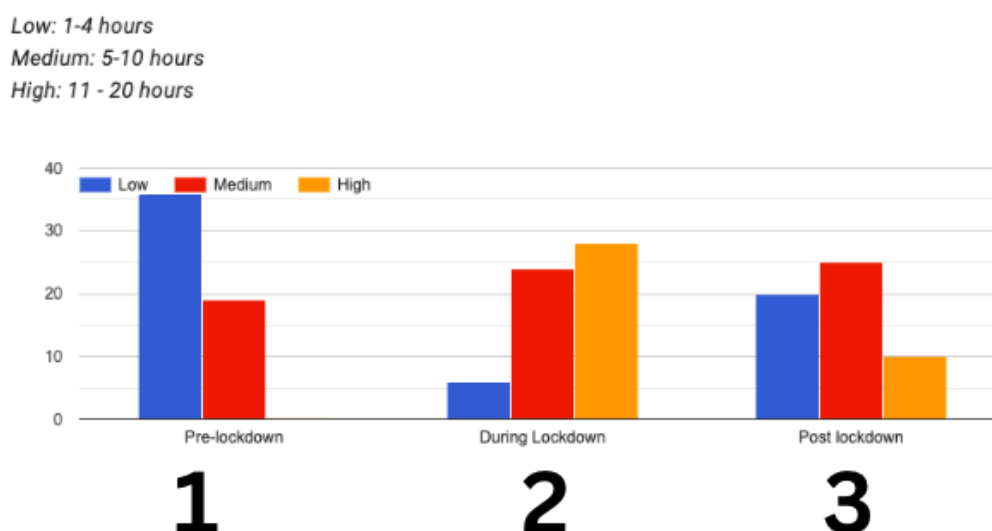
**Figure 9: Visualisation of the Change in Respondents' Engagement with Athletics**

The number of respondents who considered it a low priority (they spent only 1-4 hours on it per week) was highest in the pre-lockdown period (63%). This declined dramatically during the lockdown (7.66%) but increased very marginally once the lockdown had been lifted (13%). Again, we find a positive impact in the levels of engagement of the activity.

Despite the clear positive relationship between the creative engagements taken up and the overall well-being of adolescents during the lockdown, the rate of participation in these activities generally declined after the lockdown was lifted. Many participants cited the availability of more free time and access to online resources as factors of their engagement in these activities, so the reversal of the lockdown resulted in an inability to function in the same capacity. However, it is important to note that the rate of participation is distinctly higher after the lockdown compared to the pre-lockdown period. Therefore, the long-term effect of the lockdown on the capacity for creativity of the individual has further potential for exploration.

The graph below depicts the rate of engagement in creative activities that adolescents reported at three different stages: 1. Before lockdown, 2. During the lockdown period, and 3. After the lockdown had ended. The graph displays mostly low to medium levels of engagement prior to the lockdown as many people found it difficult to find time within their busy schedules for creative activities.

During the lockdown, many youths found creative activities to be an effective coping tool. Hence, most participants reported medium to high levels of engagement. Finally, when the lockdown protocols were lifted, respondents found it difficult to sustain the activities taken up during lockdown as their physical, social and temporal circumstances had changed completely and most reported medium levels of engagement.



**Figure 10: Overall Levels of Respondents' Engagement with Creative Activities Before, During and After the Lockdown**

## V. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the relationship between creative activities during the COVID-19 lockdown and the well-being of adolescents. Engaging in different types of creative activities displayed a unique positive impact on various aspects of wellbeing. The results revealed that participants who engaged in music during the lockdown demonstrated higher levels of optimism and improved time management skills. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that music engagement can positively affect mood and promote a sense of control and structure (Fancourt et al., 2019). Music may have also provided participants with a source of emotional release and helped them establish a routine and sense of purpose; thereby contributing to their improved time management skills and overall optimism.

Participants who engaged in art during the lockdown reported higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of stress. This finding highlights the therapeutic benefits of art engagement and its role in fostering stress reduction and self-expression. Art activities varied in their application and may have provided a creative outlet for participants to connect with their emotions and express themselves.

Furthermore, participants who engaged in creative writing during the lockdown exhibited higher levels of social connection and self-confidence. When compared to other research conducted along this line, harmonious conclusions can be made. Writing seems to facilitate self-reflection, enhance social connections, and promote self-confidence (Lepore et al., 2002). Especially during the lockdown, many adolescents were separated from their friends and loved ones, which limited their access to social engagement. Many participants reported the



creation of 'creative writing communities' online wherein people could share their work, connect with fellow writers, provide constructive feedback and grow together greatly shaped their positive lockdown experience. These communities not only provided an avenue for participants to share their thoughts and experiences but they also fostered a sense of connection with others and enhanced their own self-assurance.

An interesting finding is the effect of athletics (particularly exercise at the gym) on the well-being of adolescents who took it up during COVID-19. Reduced levels of physical activity during the pandemic have been closely associated with depression, anxiety levels, and general ill-being (Puccinelli et al., 2021). During the lockdown, the reduction in physical fitness for adolescents with higher physical fitness pre-lockdown was greater than that for others (Zhou et al., 2022) and this is concurrent with the conclusions of this study. Many participants described athletics as increasing their motivation and helping define a sense of self. Over the lockdown, many teenagers found support and a community in fitness enthusiasts and this propelled them into a journey of self-improvement. Athletics is the only field wherein the number of people who considered it a low priority (and only spent 1-4 hours on it per week) steadily declined from pre-lockdown to post-lockdown. This indicates that more adolescents are considering it to be an effective coping mechanism and utilise it in their daily lives even after lockdown. This also highlights the need for more fitness and physical exercise-based programs for youth in educational centres to help them cope with various crises.

It is important to note that the sustenance of these creative activities post-lockdown was improved. Though participants did not spend as much time on the activities as they did during the lockdown, they still engaged in the activities significantly more than they did before the lockdown.

Participants may have faced challenges in maintaining their engagement in creative pursuits once the restrictions were lifted. Factors such as limited access to resources, changing routines, and shifting priorities may have hindered the sustained participation in these activities. However, the exposure to these activities and the ability to use them as effective coping mechanisms ensured that participants spent more time on these activities than they did prior to the lockdown.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of evidence on the positive impact of creative activities on adolescent well-being during times of crisis. They also highlight the importance of incorporating music, art, and creative writing into interventions and support programs to address specific aspects of wellbeing. However, strategies are needed to overcome the barriers to sustaining these activities beyond the lockdown period. Future research should explore approaches to maintain and support ongoing engagement in creative pursuits, considering the unique challenges and circumstances faced by adolescents in post-lockdown environments.

The limitations of this study include:

1. **Small sample size:** The small sample size may offer biased results. This survey contains a scale which could be interpreted in different ways and when a small sample size is considered, the range of different interpretations is not available.
2. **Respondent demographics not considered:** The respondents were not asked about their age, sex, ethnicity, religion or economic background. These sociocultural factors can have a significant impact on the variables considered and should be further explored. E.g., understanding the role of gender in the well-being of adolescents who used creative activities to cope during the lockdown.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the positive impact of engaging in creative activities, specifically music, art, and creative writing, on various dimensions of adolescent wellbeing during the lockdown. The findings emphasise the significance of integrating these activities into interventions and support systems to enhance specific areas of well-being. Attention should be given to addressing the sustenance of these activities to ensure their long-term benefits and overall well-being beyond times of crisis. The longevity of these activities can be promoted by introducing creative programs at all school levels: from preschool and middle school to high school. More resources should be diverted to encouraging arts and cultural programs in schools to support and enhance positive well-being. Athletics, music, creative writing and art should be pursued in order to promote holistic well-being.

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