The Latent Digital Divides and Its Drivers in E-Learning: Among Bangladeshi Students During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The devastating COVID-19 pandemic forced academia to go virtual. Educational institutions around the world have stressed online learning programs in the aftermath of the pandemic. However, because of insufficient access to ICT, a substantial number of students failed to harness the opportunity of online learning. This study explores the latent digital divide exhibited during the COVID-19 pandemic while online learning activities are emphasized among Bangladeshi students. It also explores the digital divide exposure and the significant underlying drivers of the divide. A cross-sectional survey was employed to collect quantitative data mixed with open-ended questions to collect qualitative information from the student community. The findings revealed that despite the majority of students have physical access to ICT but only 32.5% of students could attend online classes seamlessly, 34.1% of the students reported the data prices as the critical barrier, and 39.8% of students identified the poor network infrastructure is the significant barrier for them to participate in online learning activities. This paper aimed to explore the underlying issues of the digital divide among Bangladeshi students to assist relevant stakeholders (e.g., the Bangladesh government, Educational Institutions, Researchers) in providing the necessary insights to arrange for students to undertake online learning activities successfully.

Keywords: COVID-19, Digital Divide, Digital Disruption, Online Learning

1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 infection has spread worldwide and turned into a global endemic [11, 14]. Still, now many people around the world are infected daily, and the super infectious characteristic of the virus created a global pandemic. On March 8, 2020, the first COVID-19 infected case in Bangladesh was identified [12], and till now, 544544 people were infected. However, after detecting the first COVID-19 case, the government has closed all physical activities in the educational institute [17] from End of March 2020. Due to the restriction on physical classes, many educational institutes started online teaching and learning activities. However, insufficient access to ICT (information and communication technology) became a significant concern among the student community in Bangladesh. The disparity of ICT access is also defined as the digital divide.

The term "Digital-Divide" addresses the uneven distribution of digital and ICT regarding usages, access, impact in individuals' lives, organizations, or countries. The digital divide distinguishes the effects of information and communication technologies between individuals, organizations, or countries. Between the late 1980s to early 1990s, it was a floating gossip on "information-rich" and "information-poor." After the public internet deployment, the gap was visible to access or not have access [2]. Lloyd Morrisett coined the term digital divide to indicate 'a gap between socioeconomic groups in accessing technology tools [10]. The National Report on Telecommunications and Information

Administration (2011), Falling through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide, describes the digital divide as the differences in access to telephones, personal computers (P.C.s), and the Internet among some demographic groups. Nowadays, there is a digital divide at any possible level. Similarly, there is a digital divide between schools and students [21]. The digital divide notion is not limited to having access to and not having access to ICT in the 21st century. For more than two decades, extensive research on the digital divide region has established distinct levels of the digital divide in terms of content access, ICT usage abilities, and usage outcomes [1- 23]. ICT accessibility begins with the initial definition of the digital divide. The criterion to define the difference was, having access or not having access in the early digital divide term. It was a binary term between two states that was restricted.

Nevertheless, the binary notion is no longer present. In recent years, various levels of digital division have been exposed. To identify the digital divide, the researcher defined three levels of the digital divide that explain that does only provides access. According to [18-20], the first level divide is the difference in physical access to the Internet and device; the second level is the gap in digital skills and motivation; the third level is the use gap in the benefits of use. For various times, different levels of digital division have been identified and sustain for different periods. The first level divide: physical access was in view from 1995 to 2003, the second level divide: skills and use were centered in 2004, and the third level divide was still under consideration in 2012: outcomes of usages [22].

Many studies have established the level of income as an essential determinant of ICT access opportunities [28-36]. These studies found a link between the amount of income and access to ICT. They found that a higher income level improves the ability to access ICT. Similarly, lower income contributes to less opportunity. It is also possible that people from developed countries with lower income levels will have less access to devices that will promote the digital divide at the first level. Consequently, the student community from such countries faces the digital divide during the education system incorporates ICT. Among all the digital divide drivers, income level, educational attainment, and urbanization are the primary drivers [5, 21, 25]. Therefore, Bangladesh's student community is vulnerable considering arranging adequate access to ICT, as it has a lower per capita income and lower internet penetration rate [38, 40].

A UN policy brief on EDUCATION DURING COVID-19 stated that the COVID-19 pandemic was the most massive disruption of human history's education system, affecting approximately 1.6 billion learners worldwide [34]. According to the study, an average of 94% of learners worldwide, even 99% of poor and lower-middle-income nations, were affected by the devastating COVID-19 pandemic. Schools went to a sudden shutdown due to health concerns, but governments from several countries responded quicker and switched to online learning. In developed countries, 80-85% of learners earned online learning coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, fewer than 50 low-income countries did [34]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh declared a long-term lockdown in the education sector. From March 2020 till now, none of its educational institutes has operated in face-to-face mode. Despite the government of Bangladesh initiating online learning activities, there is a high possibility of discrimination to join the online learning activities due to the digital divide. A large number of people seems beyond ICT access.

Moreover, no study is available that examined the digital divide's status and drivers of the divides during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, we focused on the latent digital divide in Bangladesh during emphasized ICT enable learning activities while the pandemic forced institutes to go online. The study revealed notable novel facts that exposed the latent digital divide among the Bangladeshi student community. The findings will help the policymakers and respective stakeholders to rethink and redesign their online learning activities. Furthermore, the study will help undertake necessary fundamental initiatives to reduce the digital divide with an intertwined relationship with online learning activities. However, the OCVID-19 pandemic exposed the untold story of the digital divide in Bangladesh, and the study illustrated the image.

2. Literature Review

The term digital divide has become an indicator to measure ICT access status in developing countries [48]. Empirical evidence exhibits that developing countries are confronting severe inequalities accessing ICT.   Pick et al. (2020) examines the geographical and socioeconomic pattern of adaptation, diffusion, and ICT utilization in 36 nations of LAC (Latin American and the Caribbean). The LAC has 10.5 % of world internet users, and the internet penetration has reached 71.5% in 2020 [52], which seems progressive. Nonetheless, inequality still exists, considering the adaptation and utilization of ICT in LAC. Authors claimed that prosperous LAC nations had two times more internet penetration than impoverished nations. Another comprehensive study from 2006 on a data set of 161 countries found the region-specific explanation for the divide in ICT penetration [45]. The study identified digital divides accounted primarily by income differential. Income level has been one of the critical drivers of the digital divide that remains stable.

In Africa, rising inequality like algorithmic capitalism has become a significant concern [46]. Algorithmic capitalism refers to cyber capitalism or the spectacular growth of information ventures (e.g., Google, Microsoft, Amazon). Karar (2019) states that information capitalism was the third generation of capitalism after mercantilism and the Industrial Revolution [46]. Tewathia et al. (2020) provided recent insight into the relation between India's digital disparity and social inequalities after analyzing a sizable national quantitative dataset. They applied Marxian perspectives and revealed the influence of ICT ownership and skill to hold higher labor class status. The study also applied Weberian perspectives to examine how ICT assets exclude others by creating an ICT wealthy class. Tewathia et al. (2020) concluded that ICT might amplify the digital divide in India due to socioeconomic inequalities [50]. A recent study investigated the first digital divide in Thailand, analyzing a household ICT usage survey of 217,217 individuals [47]. They noticed that affordability is the main factor behind the gap in internet usage in Thailand, led by device ownership.

South Asian least-developed countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are confronting the digital divide due to lower educational attainment, lower socioeconomic status, lack of motivation, lack of digital literacy, which drive a vicious cycle of inequality. Zhou et al. (2011) analyzed survey data from nearly 500 individuals in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka to investigate determinants of ICT use in rural areas [51]. The result of the study indicates that higher levels of education are linked to higher computer use, and South Asian countries are found to fall behind in terms of necessary education and digital literacy.

3. Research Question

Evidently, the digital divide exists in almost all world regions, regardless of their economic status. Although ICT incorporation has introduced an unprecedented way to interact in education, there is a high possibility that ICT-enabled learning activities will introduce barriers to many students in Bangladesh due to the disparity in access to ICT. Consequently, students may face a digital divide during the exacerbated online learning activities during the covid-19 pandemic. The study formulated two research questions to address the issue as

- RQ1: What is the scenario of the digital divide among Bangladeshi students during the COVID-19 pandemic while they need to participate in online learning activities?
- RQ2: If the digital divide found in RQ1, then what are the key drivers?

4. Materials and Methods

The research has been conducted employing mixed research methods where a quantitative survey yields the primary data. Initially, desk research and literature review were conducted to get the existing known facts on digital inequalities in Bangladesh and get a comprehensive idea of the digital divide concept. Then, a structured survey was used to collect quantitative data mixed with open-ended questions to collect qualitative information from the student community. The survey was conducted, excluding the

identification of respondents to ensure privacy and ethics. The student community engaged in higher education (post-secondary) was the target population, regardless of gender.   The research tried to find the critical factors driving the digital divide among the student community while online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are 25 questions designed to get specific data regarding internet access and access to digital devices like personal computers and smartphones—some of the questions designed to collect data about their engagement focus on different types of purposes. In addition, some questions had open-ended answer options to collect some qualitative data. Both English and Bengali were used amalgamated for generating questions and close-ended answers to make the survey easy to understand to the Bangladeshi student community. As the survey was conducted during the lockdown, the only way was conducting the study was through online submission. A google form was designed to collect data, but there was a problem that only people having internet access and computer/smartphone could attend.

Nevertheless, the study focused on identifying the lack of ICT access and facing the digital divide. Therefore, online participation was done by arranging a setup for engaging them. Snowball method was applied to resolve the issue, first various student community was identified from the Facebook group through different known communities of the authors. Then, they were requested to engage their friends, who are the potential target people. Some Facebook groups helped in this regard to provide devices and access to the people to respond to the survey. Finally, 123 students from five different education levels, 15 age groups, and four different residential regions responded to the survey after providing consent. Based on the data volume, Microsoft Excel was used to analyzing the quantitative data. Students were informed about the purpose of the study before beginning and asked to provide consent to proceed with the Google Form.

Maximum 82.1% respondents were college/diploma students, while 13%, 2.4%, 1.6%, and 0.8% respondents were undergrad, postgraduate, secondary school, and secondary school completed level respectively. The highest number of respondents lived in the rural area (47.2%), whereas 25.2%, 23.6%, and 4.1% of respondents live in the city, urban, and small-town.

Table 1. Respondent student's demography, ICT access, and e-learning activities overview. (N=123)

Variable	Response/Range	Percentage
Level of Study	Postgraduate	2.4%
	Undergrad	13%
	College/Diploma	82.1%
	Secondary School Completed	0.8%
	Secondary School	1.6%
Residency Region	Divisional City	25.2%
	Small Town	4.1%
	Urban	23.6%
	Rural	47.2%
Age	16-18 Years	54.4%
	19-23 Years	38.2%
	24-30 Years	7.2%
Student's Smartphone Ownership Status	Students have a personal smartphone	86.2%
	Students use smartphone owned by family members	8.1%
	Family member has a smartphone, but the student does not have access	3.3%
	Neither student nor his family member has access to a smartphone	2.4%
	Students have PC	44.7%

Student's Personal Computer (P.C.) access status	Students do not have access to P.C.	43%
	Students have access to family member's PC	9.8%
	Students' family has P.C., but they do not have access to that	2.4%
Student's Access to the Internet	Students have adequate Internet access 24x7	26%
	Students have sufficient access on demand	37.4%
	Students have limited access to the Internet	35%
	Students do not have access to the Internet at all	1.6%
Students join online classes	Can attend all the online classes	32.5%
	Can attend most of the class but not all	20.3%
	Can attend some of the classes	30.9%
	Can attend a few classes rarely	3.3%
	Can attend none of the online classes	13%
The student identified as the critical barrier to join online classes	Expensive mobile data package as most of the student's use cellular data	34.1%
	Weak signal of the cellular Internet network	39.8%
	Do not have adequate access to the device (P.C., Smartphone)	10.6%
	Due to not having access to the Internet	2.4%
	Other Destruction (Remiss, Personal Issue, Not Feeling Interesting)	4%
	Engaged in Job during COVID-19 and not attending the online class	1.6%

5. Results

The study has revealed four critical factors that driving the digital divide during the COVID-19 pandemic which are:

5.1. Dependency on Mobile Internet and Price of Internet Package is Driving the Digital Divide

Among the respondents, 32.5% say they can always join their online classes seamlessly, 20.3% of students report that they can participate in their online learning activities most of the time, 30.9% say that they sometimes manage to join the online class. A group of 13% of students replies that they cannot join their online classes, and 3.3% says that they can join rarely. It seems the most majority of students face impediments to taking part in online learning activities. The scenario is likely to be complicated than the typical digital divide and lack access to online classes. The Data shows a critical relationship between joining the class and not having access to a digital device. Some of the students having internet access or device informed that they could not join the online class due to the data package price. Among the 123 respondents, only 16 students cannot join online classes at all, where 11 say they do not have a personal computer. The information might be interpreted as this 13% of students face the digital divide, but all respondents say they have access to a smartphone; therefore, they can access the Internet. The scenario implies that the inability to access is not resisting them to join the online class. From the group who do not have internet access, 9 of the 16 respondents describe that data price is the primary barrier to joining their online classes. It seems that the mobile Internet is costly to

keep subscribed and access online classes. The data revealed that broadband Internet is not widely available among the student community. According to the data, 73.2% of students use mobile/cellular internet connection to access the Internet, 25.2% of people use wired or wireless dedicated/shared internet connectivity, and 1.6% of the people reports that they do not have any way to access the Internet. Most people depend on mobile Internet, and the price of cellular data package high. Therefore, dependency on mobile Internet and cost seems to be a potential driver of the digital divide instead of not having access or not owning a digital device. The most recent Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission data shows 108.19 million internet subscribers in Bangladesh; 92.08% of internet subscribers use Mobile Internet, which seems to dominate over cheap broadband internet service [42]. The respondents people seem representative as most of them rely on mobile Internet.

Critical analysis of the data revealed a complex relation that identifies a significant digital divide in Bangladesh. Figure.2 illustrates some factors that would clarify the reason for the inability to join online learning activities. Considering internet access, 98.4% of students said they have access, which seems to be an adequate number. In terms of access to digital devices, 86.2% of students said they own smartphones, and 44.7% have personal computers. Despite having sufficient access, most students cannot join their online learning activities, as only 32.5% reported that they can always access them. Interpretation of data reveals that most students rely on mobile Internet, and 34.1% of students identify data prices as a significant barrier. They cannot effort mobile data package to keep their internet access uninterrupted. Physical access and device availability become useless due to data prices. Therefore, data price drives the digital divide over a satisfactory physical access arrangement among the student community. A study on rich and technologically advanced countries also finds the first-level digital divide remaining due to ongoing expenses to maintain access and devices [22]. Therefore, it is not difficult to perceive that after connecting people in Bangladesh, they will face the digital divide caused by expenses.
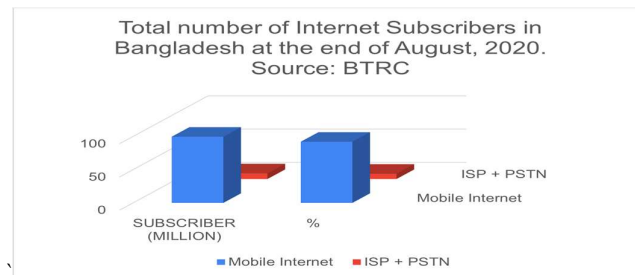
Figure.1: Internet subscribers in Bangladesh and access type.
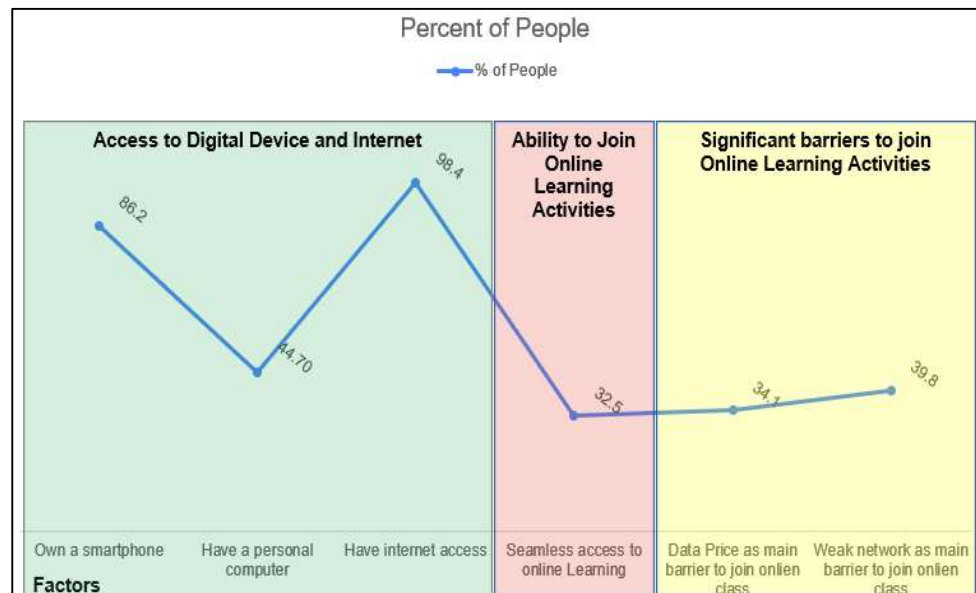
Figure.2: Access to a digital device, joining the online class, and the barrier to seamless access.

5.2 Inadequate Mobile Network Infrastructure and Poor Signal in Rural Area is a Significant Driver

Quality internet access has become a significant digital divide. At the outset, having access or not having access was a binary concept of the divide. However, profound research work revealed that the digital divide is almost an ever-evolving phenomenon that includes a new form of the digital divide. Van Dijk and Jan A.G.M researched to find the achievement and shortcomings in digital divide research in 2006 [23]. The authors focused on the research between 2000-2005. The study revealed that gradually research work identified the digital divide's mitigation considering having access and not having devices. Still, the new metaphor of the digital divide emerges like "Lack of Skill" or "Lack of Motivation" [23]. The study indicates that research on the digital divide should be a simultaneous task with the technology's pace as a new formation has been identified.

Network quality has been identified as one of the most destructive issues driving access quality and the first digital divide in Bangladesh. Comparatively, students from rural regions face amplified barriers regarding network signal quality. Our study revealed that 47% of students from rural areas identified weak network signals as the main barrier to online classes, 35% of their counterparts from city-urban areas, and the same issue. However, poor network access quality seems a dominant driver of the digital divide as most students depend on cellular mobile internet service. The demography of the Internet's use in Bangladesh supports the statement as 92.08% of internet subscribers use Mobile Internet [42]. Consequently, after having sufficient access to digital devices, many students remain out of the virtual classrooms. There is empirical evidence that the digital divide and network access quality foster the digital divide despite necessary access [19-20]. Thus, the Bangladeshi student community is experiencing the first digital divide due to a lack of quality network access. In recent days Internet penetration and availability of devices have been notably boosted in Bangladesh. However, the quality of the network appeared as the latent digital divide driver exposed during the emphasized online learning during COVID-19.

5.3 Students from Rural Region Likely to Face Discrimination to Access Online Class

While the wealthy can continue their schooling online during the coronavirus pandemic, low-income rural children cannot do so because of a lack of infrastructure and amenities. Out of the 21.6 million students enrolled in Bangladesh's elementary and primary schools, another 13 million students are enrolled in secondary schools, and the remaining 4 million are enrolled in universities and colleges. According to the Bangladesh

Ministry of Education, 76% of the country's secondary schools are located in rural communities. In addition, according to the article, approximately 60% of primary school students attend government-run schools, mostly in rural areas.
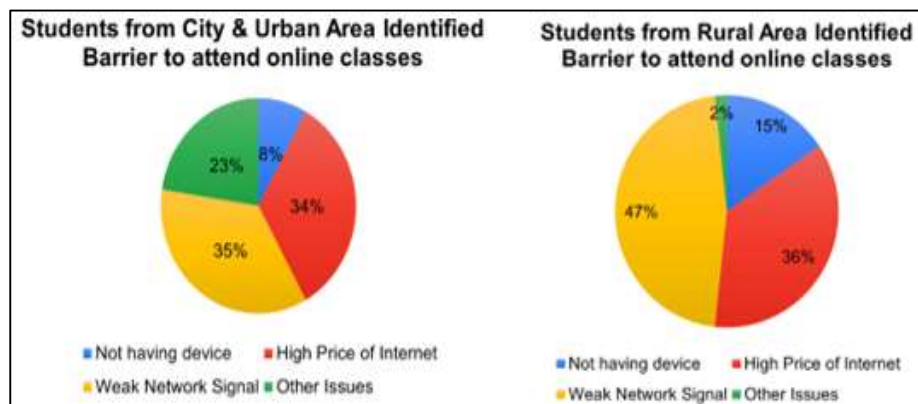
Figure3: Barrier to join online classes in different geographic regions.

"Rural schools lack infrastructure including digital equipment, qualified teachers and hygiene facilities," stated an independent study by a South Asian NGO (SANEM). Uddin claimed that online schooling had stopped education efforts in the country ("COVID-19 deepens the divide between Bangladesh's rural and urban students | Asia| An in-depth look at news from across the continent | D.W. | 22.10.2020," n.d.) [3]. Meanwhile, Bangladeshi private schools have quickly adopted online learning methods after the attack, using social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube to deliver lectures. Generally found in urban cities, these private schools serve the upper classes. The schools are better equipped and prepared, and the students have access to technology because their parents are also computer literate. In a recent study conducted by BRAC, the organization found that over half of Bangladesh's rural households lacked access to the Internet. In contrast, over half of Bangladesh's rural households lacked access to smartphones ("COVID-19 deepens divide between Bangladesh's rural and urban students | Asia| An in-depth look at news from across the continent | D.W. | 22.10.2020," n.d.) [3].

There is a clear difference in online class participation patterns between the students from the rural and city-urban areas. Among all respondents, 13% reported that they could not join any online learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analyzing quantitative data, we revealed that 62.5% of the students who cannot attend online classes are from rural areas (Figure 4). It illustrates that student from rural regions face an extended digital divide from the city and urban areas. Figure5 draws the pattern of online class participation of students from different locations. The number of students from rural areas who cannot attend online classes seems twice that of students from cities or urban areas.

5.4 Pandemic Increased Digital Distraction Which is Resulting Third Level Digital Divide

The second and third stages of the digital divide focus on contemporary studies on the digital divide, as the Internet and devices expand accessibly. The digital divide moves from the first-level access divide to the second-level digital divide as Internet and device penetration grows. Many studies identified the utilization disparity of ICT, which leads to the third digital divide [7]. After having sufficient access to ICT, not everybody can gain an equal output of ICT. The attainment of utility from ICT depends on the usage pattern of an individual. For instance, some research has found that economically backward individuals spend more time on the Internet [9,16]. The advantages of using ICT are not guaranteed by spending more time on the Internet; it depends on how and why a person uses ICT. There is a difference between economically privileged classes in ICT consumption patterns and ICT benefits [16]. In this study, they were media vulnerable as they are using ICT more in nonproductive ways. We identified explicit destruction in the study while using the COVID-19 pandemic magnified the usage of ICT. According to the respondent's answers, 50.04% of students used social media most of the time in their ICT usage pattern,

21.95% used ICT frequently for entertainment purposes, and only 26.83% were used most of the time for study purposes. Among 52.8% of participants strongly believe that the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to increase smartphone, P.C., and Internet usage during the lockdown. However, 51% of the participants argued that excessive ICT usage is devastating for their study, and 50.4% anticipated adverse effects on health. A similar scenario has been found in other countries.
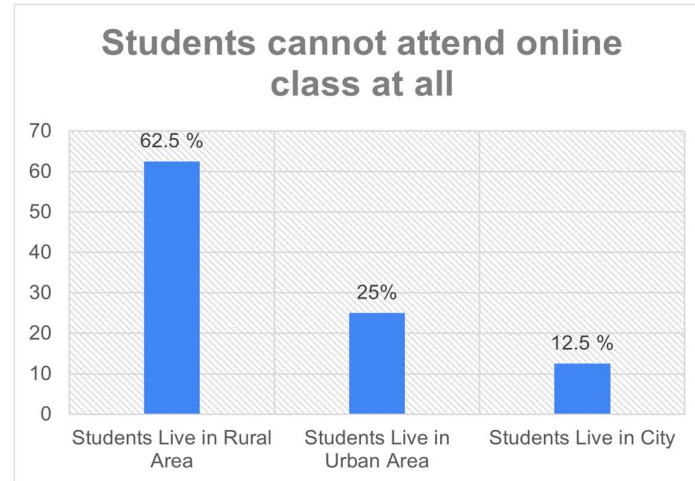
Figure 4: Distribution of students who cannot join any online learning activities based on location

Some students without reliable internet access and/or technology struggle to participate in digital learning; this gap occurs across countries, is seen among income brackets, and is seen across different income brackets. For example, the percentage of students in Norway, Switzerland, and Austria with a computer to use in the classroom is higher than the percentage of students in Indonesia, which is lower in that country (compared to the OECD average). Even within the United States, there is a significant gap between privileged backgrounds and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Among adolescents, almost all 15-year-olds from a privileged background had access to a computer to work, but nearly 25% of adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds did not. Some schools and governments provide digital equipment in order to improve the digital divide. However, some schools and governments are still concerned that diminishing the digital divide will widen this divide.
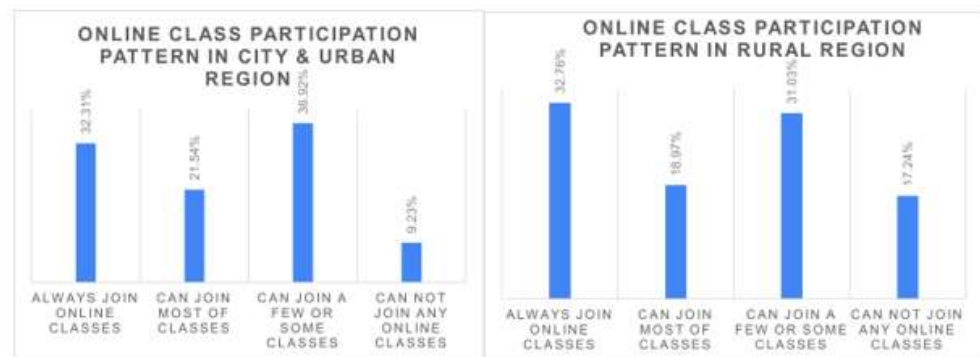
Figure 5: Participation pattern in online classes based in a different location.

Evidently, it could be asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic increased ICT usages. As a result, gradually, students adopted ICT to get into the online trend. However, the difference in ICT usage will cause different outcomes among the students. As a result, the increasing usage of ICT during the pandemic will result in the third level of the digital divide considering the usage pattern of ICT by the Bangladeshi students' community.
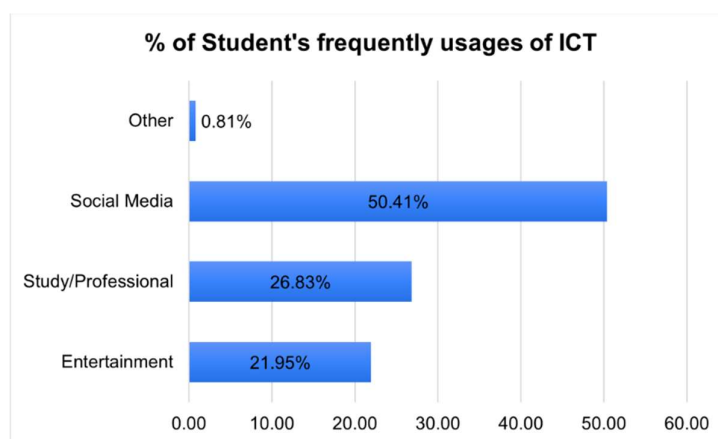
Figure 6: Most frequently, usage of ICT by students during COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Conclusions

Amid the covid-19 pandemic, the latent digital divide among the student community in Bangladesh during emphasized online learning activities was examined in this study by using a cross-sectional online survey. The critical finding reported that pandemic increased digital destruction during online learning. Internet accessibility disparity has emerged as a significant digital divide amid the covid-19 pandemic. The issues addressed in RQ1 have been revealed from the statistical analysis that a significant number of students are deprived of online learning activities, students from rural areas are more likely to face inequalities to access online classes. Despite having access to digital devices, the high cost of internet packages and dependency on mobile Internet are provoking the digital divide. According to the study, most students rely on mobile Internet, and 34.1% of students identify data prices as a significant barrier. This scenario illustrates the image addressed in RQ2. The study found that 98% of students reported they have access to devices and can arrange internet connection, but they can not afford it. Therefore, availability is enough, but affordability is the critical barrier. Inadequate mobile network infrastructure and poor signal quality in rural areas are significant drivers of the digital divide during the covid-19 pandemic. Almost twice of students in a rural area can not join the online classes compared with students from cities. Digital disruption has become an alarming issue. Instead of using ICT for learning purposes, students spend more time on social media and entertainment while getting access to ICT and being media vulnerable.

Concerning the findings, the respective stakeholders must address the internet cost issues and reduce the price for the student with swift action and policy development. Besides, the broadband internet connection should be considered and improve the existing mobile network in rural areas. Along with that, parents and teachers need to take care of students for their digital wellbeing. Moreover, to understand a comprehensive country-wise image and resolve the nationwide problems, further research is essential by the government and the internet service provider's side.

Funding: The study has been conducted from the self-initiative of the authors without any external funding.

Data Availability Statement: The data regarding this study has been securely stored following research integrity and data management rules; the corresponding author can provide them with needs.

Acknowledgments: We are thankful to Dr. Jung-Sook Lee, the faculty member of social science at UNSW, Sydney. She has provided her valuable opinion while designing the survey questionnaires. We apricate and accolade her effort to help the authors design the survey questionary as an expert on this research area.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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