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# Unravelling Cognitive Dissonance and Coping Strategies amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic
## A Critical Examination through the Lens of Young Women

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[ABSTRACT: The process of learning is characterised by assimilation of new experiences into the already existing mental representations or creating new conceptual schemas to accommodate unique and unfamiliar knowledge. Chaos, change and uncertainties that accompanied COVID-19 pandemic was a period in history when the world faced unforeseen challenges to protect themselves from the virus; it was loaded with medical, social and economic situations leading to cognitive dissonance. Challenges create opportunities to garner one's internal resources to overcome the external adverse environment, while cognitive dissonance fosters new insights as one engages in comprehending and resolving conflicting beliefs and values. Both challenges and dissonance open up prospects for learning. Youth is a stage associated with enthusiasm, optimism, and openness to new experiences. However, the unexpected conditions that emerged during the pandemic were inexplicable and overwhelming, forcing one to make sudden shifts in perspectives towards life and coping. This paper delves into the cognitive dissonance experienced by young women during the COVID-19 pandemic and explores its intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal implications. Through thematic analysis of qualitative data from eight young women aged 20-30, it examines how pandemic-induced dissonance reshaped self-perceptions, interpersonal relations, and societal constructs. Its findings reveal a profound introspection triggered by dissonance, exposing ruptures in materialistic ideologies and fostering personal resilience. The discourse on interpersonal dynamics sheds light on familial tensions, growing solidarity networks, while providing a scope for a re-examination of societal disparities. Coping mechanisms, from grassroots

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entrepreneurship to mental wellness prioritisation, emerged amidst adversity. Yet, systemic failures perpetuated unequal burdens on marginalised communities, shedding light on socio-economic fault lines. This strengthens the argument that perhaps cognitive dissonance needs to be understood as a 'societal symptom' of an unequal social structure, offering insights for fostering collective change post-crisis.
KEYWORDS: Cognitive Dissonance, Resilience, COVID-19, Social implications, Systemic challenges]

## Introduction

The cognitive framework of disequilibrium, also referred to as cognitive dissonance, can be understood as the experience arising out of the realization of holding two or more conflicting attitudes, beliefs and values regarding the same issue, relationship or event. It is manifested as a psychological struggle consisting of an internal dialogue and a mental debate within oneself, weighing the multiple conflicting sides of an argument one by one by the individual, till one side of the argument is silenced, suppressed, adjusted or discarded. The tug-of-war in the reasoning process leads to one of the two outcomes: it can reduce the output and quality of human functioning if not resolved or it can be the fuel that leads the individual to initiate a change to accommodate facets of knowledge previously not considered. Dissonance, thus, opens up a space for learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it multiple discrepancies in individual attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. When places of respite and comfort, like one's home became enforced confinements with no face-to-face contact outside of the four walls of home, with work space moving into a virtual mode, the roads outside of homes becoming isolated stretches with no vehicular movements, religious places of worships and social clubs closed indefinitely, no one could comprehend what was happening around and if at all there would ever be a remission from this state. The medical chaos that existed overshadowed all other uncertainties. People getting distanced from loved ones, having to travel on foot for days without food to reach their destinations, families coping with retrenchment-related issues all over the world lead to dissonance at different levels of existence. Furthermore, marginalised intersectional identities experienced multiple layers of concerns due to the additional social ramification of their identity, one such group being women. COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing gender inequalities, significantly impacting women's economic stability, access to healthcare and education, workload, food security, and exposure to gender-based violence. These impacts have been particularly severe for women in situations of poverty and vulnerability, reversing decades of progress in gender equality and women's rights. Gender-based violence, rooted in unequal gendered power relations, often increases during periods of social and economic instability.

Women have been disproportionately affected by the economic fallout of the pandemic. It is estimated that 47 million women and girls have been pushed into extreme poverty since the pandemic began (Oxfam, 2021). The informal economy, where 740 million women globally are employed, saw a 60% income reduction during the first month of the pandemic (Oxfam, 2021). Women are overrepresented in sectors like accommodation and food services, which have been hardest hit by the pandemic. They are also more likely to hold precarious and vulnerable employment without access to social protection or safety nets. In low-income countries, 92% of women work in informal, dangerous, or insecure

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jobs, further shedding light on their economic instability (Oxfam, 2021). Furthermore, the pandemic disrupted health systems worldwide, negatively impacting women's access to essential sexual and reproductive health services. This disruption has increased the risks of unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and complications during pregnancy, delivery, and abortion. Research findings suggest that maternal deaths have increased by 8% to 39% per month in low- and middle-income countries due to the reduction in perinatal care (Oxfam, 2021). Additionally, the pandemic threatens to reverse 20 years of progress in girl-child education, with predictions of up to 13 million additional child marriages by 2030 due to school closures and increased poverty. The study also found that 43% of women reported feeling more anxious, depressed, or ill due to increased unpaid care and domestic workloads during the pandemic (Oxfam, 2021). Lockdowns and school closures have increased this workload, particularly for single mothers, women living in poverty, and racially and ethnically discriminated groups. Thus, it became pertinent to understand their experiences of dissonance in the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown.

## Cognitive Dissonance

Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory, formulated in 1957, was an effort to explain the intricacies of human psychology, communication, and social influence. Focusing on the interplay between behaviour and cognition, the theory has grown into a critical theory of social psychology. Shedding light on the mechanisms behind attitude and behaviour changes makes it relevant in the contemporary world. A core assumption of this theory remains that in the event of a discrepancy between an individual's attitudes and behaviour, the discomfort experienced is significant enough to motivate the individual to initiate efforts to reduce the dissonance. This can be seen in scenarios where individuals continued to engage in smoking for instance, during the COVID-19 outbreak, despite awareness of its health risks associated with the virus.

This phenomenon can be caused by several factors. One primary cause being 'logical inconsistency', where two or more thoughts, beliefs, or arguments within a person's mind are logically contradictory. Such instances were commonly seen when individuals felt the need to step out of their houses to go for social events and public gatherings despite the prevalent health risk of COVID-19 and new social norms of social distancing. 'Cultural values' are considered to be another significant source of cognitive dissonance. This can become a factor of cognitive dissonance when an individual's personal beliefs clash with the cultural norms of their society, such as valuing individualism in a collectivist culture and restricting the choice of getting married within the close circles of a limited number of friends and family members. For another strata of our society, this could translate into being forced to engage in the act of routine hand washing with soap and the use of sanitisers for a population which struggles to even get hold of water for drinking purposes. Dissonance could also be seen in the discomfort that individuals feel in eating rotis made by hand by their domestic help, and so replacing them with a 'no touch guaranteed' professional roti-making appliance, as promised by a prominent advertisement. In the context of families, this can be seen through intergenerational conflicts, where differences in values and beliefs between generations cause dissonance within the same household. A third factor is when individuals are compelled to engage in behaviour that contradicts their beliefs or attitudes due to external pressure. This perhaps

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was one of the most critical causal factors of cognitive dissonance during this period. Finally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals encountered cognitive dissonance stemming from incongruities between current cognitive frameworks and prior experiential paradigms. The dissemination of novel scientific insights contradicting established beliefs regarding virus transmission and severity precipitated cognitive dissonance among the population. Moreover, public health measures such as lockdowns and social distancing mandates disrupted people's accustomed routines and added to the problem. The pandemic's traumatic impact, including personal loss and economic hardship, compounded cognitive dissonance by challenging people's pre-existing notions of security and control.

As a result, simultaneously, the process of personal growth and evolving beliefs prompted introspection as individuals confronted discrepancies between past behaviours and current cognisance, fostering cognitive dissonance. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a critical turning point for many, witnessing cognitive dissonance arising from incongruities between evolving cognitive schemas and prior experiential frameworks.

At a human interactional level, dissonance can occur at different levels: the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and in relation to social and cultural settings. Any thought, attitude and value an individual upholds for himself has its basis in the knowledge acquired through experiences and learnings that have been accumulated over their lifespan. This knowledge base becomes the foundational structure that facilitates and contributes to present and future information processing and relationships. It forms the directing force behind the behaviours one indulges in. When values, attitudes, thoughts and behaviours are aligned, the mind experiences congruence, tranquillity and clear direction. In contrast, cognitive dissonance is an experience arising out of the realisation of conflicting cognitions. It is characterised by a mental tug-of-war in the reasoning process that may reduce the output and quality of human resources and functioning. Intrapersonal dissonance or what is termed as the ego-based view (Festinger, 1957; Bem, 1967), occurs where a disturbing inconsistency is seen to lie between the individual's positive view of him- or herself and the cognition that he or she has done something wrong. It must be noted that often the source of dissonance may not be the inconsistency between two cognitions, but the threatening perception of the self as irrational, or lacking integrity, or being incompetent. It is an outcome of personal reflections and self-assessment. When an individual realises that he or she has undertaken an action or made a decision dissonant from what would be expected of a good and competent person or acted contrary to the values he holds for himself, the self-affirming and image-maintaining process is activated. The more objective the self-assessment, the lesser will be the biased exaggerations in dissonance. This process would involve either changing the original attitude in question or changing the behaviour or changing the perception of the event (Yahya and Sukmayadi, 2020) that created the incongruence until the positive image of the self is adequately restored.

Cognitive disequilibrium and the feelings of being misaligned because of dissonance is 'remedied' through a variety of mental gymnastics like justification, rationalisation or a shift in beliefs. Often, the individual resorts to these defence mechanisms to suppress the distress or feelings of guilt generated by the dissonance, as an attempt to scale down the psychic discomfort or qualms of conscience. The more sensitive a person is, the more effort and time it takes to settle down the dissonance.

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The second level of dissonance is one at the interpersonal level which gets reflected in the extent to which two individuals agree or disagree on issues of common interest. The extent to which this inconsistency can affect their relationship determines the degree of cognitive dissonance. If the attitudes towards a person and an event are similar, the event is easily ascribed to the person. The attitude towards the event can alter the attitude towards the person who caused the event (Festinger, 1976). In addition to the incongruence between the person and the event, the degree of emotional investment in the relationship is a determinant of the level of cognitive dissonance experienced. Situations leading to dissonance will have multiple inherent variables, personal connectedness, units of causal formations and contributions associated with it. Thus, sorting an interpersonal dissonance may not be a simple task.

The third level is where social group identities and influences can be a source of dissonance as well as a vehicle for reducing it. In the contemporary world, it is imperative to differentiate the social media groups from the cultural groups. With membership increasing in social media groups, and these platforms becoming a medium of discussion as well as contention, most people find themselves at a crossroads of decision-making: whether to post their personal opinions in public view or not. Consistency and harmony with social norms provide reinforcement and rewards in the form of in-group membership, while disagreement with the majority leads to devaluation of personal status within the group. Thus, people refrain from expressing their opinions in public, but experience cognitive dissonance by not opting out of such groups where their ideas do not match with the majority. Contrary to their own convictions, individuals seeking acceptance prefer to either adhere to the conviction of the group to avoid being singled out or participate in an unplanned collective act of maintaining silence by laying to rest their personal dissenting voices.

On the cultural level, dissonance can happen when one learns or accepts a new piece of information that disagrees with a long-standing belief of the community or cultural group one belongs to. This occurs more often in the present as globalisation impacts the remotest parts of the world, presenting attractive worldviews foreign to their culture. Culture determines the motivational components that underlie the resolution of dissonance. For instance, in individualistic cultures like North America, people regard the person as unique, with their internal goals, beliefs and reflections, independent of other social beings. In collectivistic cultures, like India and the East Asian countries, the self is viewed as intertwined with the social norms, duties and responsibilities. Non-conformity here can lead to social exclusion. In another instance, a young Indian born into a multi-cultural and multi-religious society with its stringent norms, in addition to belonging to a community with specified doctrines of conduct, may find himself at loggerheads with elements in the ecological framework as proposed in Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory. With each cultural context possessing its unique microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem and the macrosystem, the youngster cannot avoid being part of the multi-layered society, with the probability of each layer becoming a source of dissonance.

## Objectives

The pandemic-induced lockdowns created circumstances that prompted individuals to reevaluate their self-perceptions and beliefs across various interactional domains.

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Consequently, the study aimed to investigate several facets: Firstly, it sought to identify the cognitive discrepancies manifested as incongruities between thoughts and actions that individuals encountered during this period. Secondly, the research aimed to discern whether these cognitive dissonances set off adjustments in specific behaviours, mindsets, or beliefs. Thirdly, it aimed to assess whether the experienced dissonance impeded normal functioning or further hindered interpersonal relationships. Finally, the study explored how individuals managed this cognitive dissonance at a social level, examining strategies employed collectively to mitigate its impact and restore cognitive equilibrium amidst the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic and associated lockdowns.

## Method

Eight young women between the ages of 20 and 30 years who got caught in the lockdown situation within homes for a minimum period of nine months during the pandemic were selected utilising the purposive sampling technique. All these women had to attend online classes or engage in online work from home as a fallout of the pandemic.

Two methods of data collection were employed. First, participants were provided with open-ended prompts related to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown, allowing them to freely express their thoughts in writing. Second, a semi-structured interview was conducted, covering various domains, including Learning about Self, Inability to Process, Interpersonal Implications, Social Concerns, Awareness of Social Realities, Family, the Socio-Political Scenario and Youth, Religious and Social Gatherings, Societal Implications, Awareness and Social Critique, and Family Well-being and Resilience. All responses were collected in written format. The data from both methods were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## Results and Discussion

The responses obtained were categorised under three broad themes, namely, self-reflection, interpersonal dilemmas, and societal incongruence. The sub-themes within the interpersonal realm were the family interactions, support from friends, and youth culture. Societal incongruence included perceptions regarding social inequalities, political scenario, medical ineffectiveness, religion and spirituality. The learnings point to the fact that crises often lead to introspection about what one values and why.

### Intrapersonal Implications

*Learnings about Materialistic Aspects:* Young women began to appreciate that true wealth lies not in the accumulation of material goods, but in the richness of experiences, relationships, and personal growth. Amidst the turmoil of the pandemic, they found themselves at a crossroads, confronting conflicting beliefs about wealth and power that had long permeated societal norms. The upheaval of the times prompted a profound re-evaluation of their relationship with materialistic aspects of life, leading to a shift in perspective towards prioritising intrinsic values over external possessions. In the face of adversity, the significance of meaningful work became increasingly apparent. Many young women found solace and purpose in pursuits that went beyond mere financial gain, seeking fulfilment in endeavours that contributed positively to their communities and

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society at large. Whether through volunteer work, creative endeavours, or pursuing passions that aligned with their values, they discovered the intrinsic value of making a meaningful impact. Moreover, the pandemic shed light on the importance of human connections. As physical distancing became the norm, the longing for genuine, heartfelt connections grew stronger. In a time marked by uncertainty, these connections served as pillars of strength, emphasizing the importance of personal growth and the richness of human interaction over material acquisitions. With the daily hustle of life slowing down, many found the opportunity to reflect, introspect, and invest in self-improvement. Whether through learning new skills, exploring creative outlets, or nurturing their mental and emotional well-being, young women embarked on a journey of self-discovery and development. Moldes, Dineva, and Ku (2022) examined the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on materialistic values through increased media consumption, stress, anxiety, and other factors. Their mixed-method study included three components. The first, a correlational study, found minor effects of media consumption and stress/anxiety on materialism. The second, a longitudinal study, showed a decrease in people's focus on money. The third, a social media analysis, noted a decline in user discourse about consumption, but an increase in brands promoting spending for well-being. These findings suggest shifts in societal and individual values with potential post-pandemic implications (Moldes, Dineva and Ku, 2022). Through this transformative process, a deeper understanding of the transient nature of material wealth emerged.

*Learning about Self:* Navigating cognitive conflicts had initiated a journey of self-discovery and personal growth during the pandemic, enabling individuals to gain deeper insights into their values, strengths, and vulnerabilities. Through introspection and reflection, individuals had developed a heightened sense of self-awareness and resilience, recognizing their inner strength and capacity for growth during the pandemic. This process had facilitated a redefinition of struggle, fear, and empowerment, empowering individuals to embrace life's challenges with courage and authenticity during the pandemic. Confronting conflicting beliefs had fostered a heightened sense of responsibility towards oneself and others during the pandemic. Individuals had recognised their role in shaping their destiny and the impact of their choices on the world around them during the pandemic. This newfound sense of responsibility had encouraged them to undertake new challenges and pursue opportunities for growth and contribution during the pandemic, fostering a deeper connection to their sense of purpose and agency.

A paper written by Kalsched (2021) talks about how the COVID-19 pandemic affects people both collectively and personally. Kalsched suggests that if we use our imagination in a more positive and realistic way, it can help us heal from trauma. He says this depends on our ability to face the reality of our vulnerability as human beings. Kalsched also talks about the ideas of psychologists Ernest Becker and Carl Jung, who studied how people deal with the fear of death and the body. He suggests that accepting our vulnerability can lead to a better use of our imagination. Finally, Kalsched connects these ideas to the Black Lives Matter movement, saying it shows how imagination can be used positively during difficult times.

The process of confronting cognitive conflicts had cultivated gratitude and appreciation for life's blessings during the pandemic. Individuals had developed a deeper appreciation for supportive relationships, opportunities, and experiences that had enriched their lives during the pandemic. This sense of gratitude had fostered humility and contentment

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during the pandemic, encouraging individuals to cherish the present moment and find joy in simple pleasures during the pandemic.

Recognising the interconnectedness of mental, emotional, and physical health, individuals had prioritised self-care and resilience-building practices during the pandemic. By incorporating mindfulness, spending more time with loved ones in their daily routines during the pandemic, individuals promoted psychological resilience and well-being. Kloos et.al. (2022) conducted a study to investigate the effectiveness of a gratitude app in improving the mental health of individuals impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a randomised controlled trial, participants were allocated to either immediate or delayed access to the gratitude app. Assessments at baseline, six weeks, and twelve weeks measured mental well-being, anxiety, depression, and stress. Results indicated that the immediate access group demonstrated superior outcomes compared to the delayed group at both time points. Factors such as gratitude, positive reframing, and rumination partially mediated the app's effects on well-being. The study concludes that a gratitude app is a satisfactory and effective intervention for enhancing mental health during challenging times such as a pandemic.

*Inability to Process:* Many individuals struggled to process the widespread job losses that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden and severe economic downturn left millions unemployed, creating a sense of uncertainty and fear about the future. This anxiety was compounded by the fear of sharing food and other resources, as the risk of virus transmission was high. The rapid changes and the sheer scale of the crisis overwhelmed people, making it difficult for them to grasp the full extent of the situation. This inability to process the dramatic shifts in their lives led to heightened stress and confusion.

The pandemic brought with it an unprecedented level of disruption that was difficult for many to fully comprehend. The global nature of the crisis, combined with its multifaceted impacts on health, economy, and daily life, made it challenging for individuals to understand its full scope. The constant influx of information, often contradictory and confusing, further muddled people's perceptions. This inability to comprehend the pandemic's scale and its ramifications led to a sense of helplessness and disorientation, as people struggled to make sense of a rapidly changing world.

Among students and educators, there was a significant sense of anger and frustration when it became apparent that some students were exploiting the situation by attending classes from bed. This behaviour was perceived as disrespectful and unfair, particularly when many were striving to maintain a semblance of normalcy and dedication to their education despite the challenging circumstances. The anger stemmed from a perceived lack of responsibility and equity, as well as the broader stress and emotional strain caused by the pandemic.

The pandemic prompted deep personal reflection for many individuals, leading to a profound questioning of their own circumstances. The pervasive uncertainty and the dramatic impact on daily life led people to ask, 'why me?' as they sought to understand why they were personally affected by the crisis. This introspection often brought up feelings of vulnerability and existential doubt, as people grappled with the randomness and unpredictability of the pandemic's impact on their lives.

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For some, the pandemic resulted in a sense of resignation to fate. Faced with overwhelming challenges and a lack of control over the situation, these individuals accepted their circumstances with little hope for change. This resignation often manifested as a coping mechanism, allowing people to conserve emotional energy and maintain a degree of psychological stability. However, it also reflected a deep-seated sense of powerlessness and a surrender to the inevitability of their situation, shedding light on the profound impact of the pandemic on mental health and well-being.

## Interpersonal Implications

Interpersonal relationships were profoundly impacted by the confrontation of conflicting beliefs or behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic. Family interactions took on new dimensions as individuals navigated the complexities of working from home and managing household responsibilities amidst the pandemic. Parents had become models of reaching out to others, demonstrating the value of family support and cohesion. Additionally, families had gained insights into the challenges and skills of their members at their respective workplaces. The experience of working from home had provided exposure to different work cultures, fostering a greater appreciation for each other's professional lives and responsibilities. Secondly, the sense of connectedness with people had been significantly heightened during the pandemic, leading to a stronger feeling of belongingness within communities. Individuals had realised the inherent goodness in people as they observed and participated in new ways of helping others, such as home delivery of food and essential supplies. This period shed light on the importance of valuing each other and showing concern for families who had lost members to the virus. The collective efforts to support one another reinforced the sense of connectedness and solidarity within communities. Additionally, the pandemic highlighted the critical role of youth as the future of the world, emphasising their potential to drive positive change. The challenges posed by the pandemic led to a renewed focus on the contributions and responsibilities of young people. As the next generation of leaders and innovators, the youth were seen as pivotal to shaping a more resilient and compassionate world. Their adaptability, creativity, and commitment to social causes were crucial in navigating the crisis and fostering a sense of hope and optimism for the future. Understanding that people formed important connections and supported each other during the global uncertainty of the pandemic can help us create better plans and strategies to strengthen relationships and community bonds in future crises. The experiences and lessons learned from this period offer valuable insights into the transformative potential of interpersonal relationships in navigating global challenges.

*Social Concern:* Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a heightened sense of social concern surrounding the large number of people losing their jobs. This concern extended beyond individual circumstances to encompass broader societal implications. Researchers and individuals alike were troubled by the economic repercussions of widespread unemployment, recognising the far-reaching impact on families, communities, and society as a whole. The loss of livelihoods highlighted existing inequalities and the need for systemic support and intervention to address the social fallout of the pandemic.

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*Awareness of Social Realities:* The pandemic served as a catalyst for gaining a deeper awareness of social realities and the pervasive inequalities that exist within society. Researchers noted a shift in perspective as individuals became more attuned to the unfavourable and discriminatory conditions faced by different segments of the population. From disparities in access to healthcare and economic opportunities to systemic injustices based on race, gender, and socio-economic status, the pandemic laid bare the structural inequities that underpin society. This heightened awareness sparked conversations and actions aimed at promoting social justice and equity in the face of adversity. A paper by Stok et al. (2021) delves into the social inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on disparities along socio-economic and socio-cultural lines. Drawing on contemporary literature, the authors highlight how these inequalities affect both the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 infection and the impact of COVID-19 prevention measures. The discussion centres on the challenges these disparities pose to solidarity and social justice, emphasising threats to intergenerational, global, and intergroup solidarity. This perspective offers insights into the complexities of navigating the social sphere. The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching effects on individuals and societies, including increased morbidity, mortality, and worsened social inequalities, particularly among socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Social distancing measures also impacted certain demographics more than others, such as specific occupations, youth, women, and those with pre-existing health conditions. This poses challenges for solidarity and social justice across generations and populations. Understanding these issues can help formulate informed policy responses to address the pandemic's unequal impacts and shape our future societal outcomes. The pandemic shed light on the profound struggles faced by individuals who lacked financial resources. Researchers documented the challenges of navigating daily life without a stable income, from accessing basic necessities such as food and shelter to coping with the mental and emotional toll of financial insecurity (Singh and Bedi, 2022). As job losses mounted and economic instability grew, the plight of those without money became increasingly visible within communities. Their struggles served as a sobering reminder of the systemic barriers and structural inequalities that perpetuate poverty and marginalisation. In response, researchers and advocates called for targeted interventions and support systems to address the immediate needs of vulnerable populations and address the root causes of economic disparity (Mezzina et al., 2022).

*Duality of Human Behaviour:* The pandemic provided a stark contrast in human behaviour, ranging from acts of generosity and altruism to instances of greed and corruption. Researchers observed a surge in community solidarity and volunteerism as individuals came together to support those in need. From grassroot initiatives to large-scale relief efforts, people demonstrated compassion and empathy in the face of adversity (Fridman et al., 2022). However, alongside these acts of kindness, there were also instances of opportunism and exploitation, with some individuals and entities seeking to profit from the crisis at the expense of others. This duality of human behaviour highlighted the complexities of interpersonal dynamics during times of crisis and highlighted the importance of ethical decision-making and accountability.

*Family Dynamics:* It must be pointed out that in situations where the youngster is going through dissonance, even the parents get sucked into it. In most families, in early years of adolescence, conflict is more about clothing, social media, music, and leisure time than about such major issues like politics or religion. Adolescents' and young adults' increasing

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cognitive sophistication and critical thinking skills compel them to point out logical flaws and inconsistencies in parents' positions and actions. They no longer accept their parents as unquestionable authorities. Issues from other domains of life begin to magnify as they become older: body image issues, drugs and alcohol, curfew timings, academic subject choices, job selection, relationships, and the list can go on. These are issues that are mostly individual and situation-specific, and need case-by-case handling. Some of the issues may not stem exclusively from the youngster's attitude or misbehaviour. They could be compounded by the rigidity of parental attitudes or by unpleasant attributes of the parent, like alcoholism, narcissistic tendencies, etc. However, limited access to resources of consultation or counselling outside of the home during the pandemic, largely limited to online modes of connectivity, created simmering problems leading to distress and mental health concerns amongst the youth as well as the older family members.

Depending upon the parenting style—Authoritarian (Disciplinarian), Permissive (Indulgent), Uninvolved, or Authoritative—the parents would either resonate with the same sentiments as the child, or suffer greatly because of their inability to accept new evidence and alternative perceptions that are contrary to their own indoctrination. Dissonance may be generated because of the difference between the 'parent's internal working model'. Each parent having come from different backgrounds carries forward elements from their respective childhood experiences and applies it to their present situation. This may be a source of dissonance turning the family into a battlefield, leading to intergenerational conflicts.

The worst situation of cognitive dissonance, viz., incest, where a male family member who is looked upon as the protector turns into the sexual abuser, was also on the rise. With restricted access to external social interaction, with families locked up within the four walls of home, often facing financial crunch as well as privacy issues, there was an upsurge in domestic violence cases reported from across the world. A study by Tener et al. (2021) looks at how the COVID-19 pandemic impacts child sexual abuse that takes place within families, focusing on the context of the United States and Israel. The study finds that COVID-19 has made things harder for families dealing with this kind of abuse. It caused severe mental health concerns and inter-relational problems. The study also reveals that fewer cases of abuse are being reported because of COVID-19 lockdown, resulting in inaccessibility to agencies of law and order. The psychological effects of such lockdowns also included loneliness, stress, depression, and anxiety, exacerbated by social isolation which increased the risk of child abuse during school closures and lockdowns (Rosenthal and Thompson, 2020). The findings suggest that effective provisions need to be put in place, online or otherwise, that can be accessed during such crises.

*Youth and Socio-Politics:* During 2020, the young generation had suddenly matured, skipping many years ahead of their age. The youth had been hit with dissonance after dissonance between what they had been theoretically taught regarding human rights and what they were experiencing personally or vicariously. Youngsters found themselves tossed between opposing ideologies, particularly in this highly networked world of high-speed communication. The pandemic intensified this dissonance for many who witnessed the stark inequalities in resource distribution and social protections. For instance, seeing fellow students attending online classes from the comfort of their homes while others struggled without access to digital devices or internet connectivity created significant psychological tension and dissonance. School closures during the pandemic necessitated

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a shift to online learning, which presented significant challenges. While some students benefited from reduced stress related to physical activities and transportation, others faced academic difficulties due to limited internet access and lack of supporting materials. Parents struggled to balance their children's schooling with their own work-from-home responsibilities, financial instability, and domestic tasks, leading to increased stress and anxiety (Gayatri, 2020; Masten and Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). Families with children with special needs faced additional challenges, requiring a supportive home environment to mitigate these difficulties (Ameis et al., 2020).

The World Bank released a report in February 2023, analysing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people under the age of 25. The report revealed significant disruptions to human capital development at crucial stages of life, potentially jeopardising the well-being of future generations. School closures, lockdowns, and disruptions to essential services had adverse effects on learning, health, and skills acquisition. As a result, students faced substantial learning losses, with some pre-school age children experiencing over 34% declines in learning. Additionally, youth employment suffered, with millions of job losses and decreased earnings. The report emphasised the urgency of targeted interventions to address these setbacks, including vaccination campaigns, access to education, and youth employment programs. Without immediate action, the pandemic's impact on human capital could deepen poverty and inequality, affecting multiple generations. Therefore, the report urged governments to prioritise investments in health, education, and social protection systems to build resilience for future crises.

*Religious and Social Gatherings:* With the closing down of religious centres those who were accustomed to ritualistic practices in places of worship suddenly realised that they had to find new ways to substitute the religious obligations and rituals that they had been habituated to during the pre-pandemic situation. Many reported having transcended the basic habitual rituals and moving into a higher plane of spirituality at an individual level, which was quite different from the collective communal level they were used to during their pre-pandemic visits to the religious places of worship. In addition, restrictions on marriage celebrations and other community gatherings also had to be assimilated into the psyche as contexts for learning minimalistic living. Discovering this level of transcendence was reported as a boon, which they would not have experienced or attempted if the religious places had not been out of bounds and other related restrictions were not put in place. The shift is similar to what Melvin (2010) has stated in the context of post-modernism where spirituality is self-defined as a state of freedom and morality that goes beyond the strict confines of religious doctrines.

The paper by Joshi (2021) examines the psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, shedding light on this, often-overlooked, dimension of the crisis. Despite the widespread impact, India's response has primarily focused on health and relief measures, neglecting the psychosocial aspects. Drawing on experiences from iCALL, a national-level psycho-social counselling service, and a project from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, the paper discusses the stressors faced by individuals, especially those from vulnerable communities. It highlights the complex interplay of factors at individual, interpersonal, community, and structural levels contributing to distress. Critically assessing the mental health framework prevalent during the pandemic, the paper advocates for a 'psycho-social' paradigm that considers the interaction between psychological and social factors.

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It emphasises the reciprocal relationship between development and psychosocial distress and calls for integrating mental health into development responses. The paper concludes with a plea for intersectoral dialogue, integrated responses, and increased investment in mental health and psychosocial infrastructure to effectively address the pandemic's challenges.

## Societal Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on societal dynamics, bringing to light various conflicts and disparities within communities. By examining themes such as inequalities, social responsibility, and medical realities, the present study provides insights into the societal shifts and responses that occurred during this unprecedented period. To begin with, the pandemic had exacerbated existing inequalities, revealing deep-seated disparities within different strata of society. Instances of fake stories and false news about COVID-19 had been used to undermine new enterprises, creating additional challenges for those trying to establish themselves during the crisis. Landlords had treated tenants poorly, reflecting the harsh realities faced by vulnerable populations. The stark differences in privileges had become disturbingly apparent as the pandemic highlighted the vast schism between different socio-economic groups. These inequalities highlighted the need for systemic change and greater social equity. Secondly, the sense of social responsibility had been heightened during the pandemic, with individuals and communities coming together to support those in need. There had been a collective concern for families who had lost members to the virus, prompting widespread efforts to provide assistance and comfort. The pandemic emphasised the importance of social solidarity and communal support, as people recognised their shared responsibility in mitigating the impact of the crisis. This period saw a surge in acts of kindness and mutual aid, reflecting the capacity for collective action and empathy in times of hardship. Thirdly, the medical realities of the pandemic had been too sudden and overwhelming for many to fully comprehend. Initially perceived as a distant phenomenon, COVID-19 had quickly become a pressing and immediate threat. The realization of the seriousness of the virus dawned on society as cases surged and healthcare systems became strained. This led to a greater appreciation for the importance of medical preparedness and the need for robust public health infrastructure. The pandemic highlighted the critical role of healthcare professionals and the importance of accurate information and effective communication in managing public health crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed various societal conflicts and disparities, prompting a re-evaluation of social norms and structures. By examining themes such as inequalities, social responsibility, and medical realities, this paper highlights the transformative potential of addressing these conflicts to foster a more resilient and equitable society. The experiences and lessons from this period offer valuable insights into the societal shifts necessary to navigate future global challenges. Recognising and addressing societal implications is crucial for building a more just and compassionate world.

The pandemic served as a magnifying glass, illuminating the stark realities of societal inequalities and disparities that existed long before the outbreak. It provided a visual representation of the profound differences among different sections of the population, laying bare the structural inequities that permeate society. The disturbing disparities in privileges among various groups became glaringly evident, prompting widespread

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concern and calls for systemic change. The pandemic highlighted the contradictions within the social strata both domestically and globally, shedding light on the vast gap between the rich and the poor. As the crisis unfolded, the disparities in access to resources such as healthcare, and economic opportunities became increasingly apparent, shedding light on existing inequalities and deepening social divisions. This disproportionate distribution of resources further compounded the challenges faced by vulnerable communities, leaving many families struggling to make ends meet and livelihoods hanging in the balance. Developing and weaker countries bore the brunt of the pandemic's impact, grappling with limited healthcare infrastructure, economic instability and systemic vulnerabilities. The crisis laid bare the inadequacies of global systems and institutions in addressing the needs of the most marginalised populations, amplifying the urgency for international cooperation and solidarity. Moreover, as the world grappled with the profound implications of the pandemic, it became clear that the crisis was not just a health emergency but also a societal reckoning. During the pandemic, this discomfort was pervasive as people witnessed the deep cracks and crevices in social structures and systems. This newfound awareness created a significant psychological tension. To alleviate this dissonance, many individuals had to change their perspectives and acknowledge the harsh realities faced by the less privileged. This shift in perception can be seen as a form of resistance, a way of mentally and emotionally fighting against the tormenting harsh realities outside. The question 'why me?' resonated deeply with those who faced severe losses and hardships, reflecting the struggle to reconcile personal suffering with the perceived unfairness of the situation.

*Awareness and Social Critique*: The pandemic fostered a greater awareness of social realities and systemic injustices. As people observed the unfair, corrupt use of power and the denial of basic rights based on socio-economic status, there was a growing critique of existing social and political systems. The contrast between generosity and greed, volunteering and corruption, became starkly evident, leading to a deeper questioning of personal, interpersonal, societal values and imbalanced structures. This can be understood through the lens of biopolitics and critical psychology.

Luqmani and El Hashim (2021) examine the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, questioning whether it has been addressed effectively or if responses have been driven by panic, leading to potential future consequences. They highlight the rapid global spread of COVID-19 and its significant impact on human lives and economies, with millions infected and reported dead. Lockdowns and social distancing measures have caused widespread suffering, extending beyond the medical effects of the disease. The authors emphasise the glut of information from various sources, including social media, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. They advocate for global vaccination efforts as crucial to controlling further infection. However, they acknowledge public controversy and apprehension surrounding the necessity and safety of vaccines, attributing some concerns to misconceptions. The review critiques the handling of the crisis by governments, medical and scientific communities, and the media, suggesting that the current approach may lead to greater burdens in the future. Through comparative data, the authors challenge prevailing perceptions of the disease and advocate for more rational approaches to its management, given its long-term implications for human health and society.

*Biopolitics and Pandemic Inequalities:* Biopolitics, a concept popularised by Michel Foucault (1976), theorises the governance of populations through the regulation of life

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and health. The pandemic has demonstrated biopolitics in action, where governmental measures to control the virus often disproportionately affected marginalised groups. For instance, lockdowns and social distancing measures, while necessary for public health, intensified economic disparities by disproportionately impacting those in precarious employment, many of whom were women and people from the margins. The closure of informal economies and small businesses led to mass job losses, with women bearing a significant brunt due to their overrepresentation in these unorganised labour sectors (Oxfam, 2021). Critical psychology critiques mainstream psychological practices that often ignore social and political contexts. During the pandemic, the psychological impact of job losses, food insecurity, and disrupted healthcare services had been profound. The increased anxiety, depression, and stress reported by many, especially women burdened with additional unpaid care work, reflect the intersection of personal mental health and broader social injustices (Oxfam, 2021). This aligns with critical psychology's emphasis on understanding mental health within socio-political contexts. The pandemic also provided a contrasting visualisation of societal inequalities. The sight of individuals struggling for basic necessities while others adapted to remote work in relative comfort highlighted the disturbing disparities in privileges and resources. This awareness, while increasing empathy and social concern for some, also led to anger and frustration at the visible contradictions and injustices in the social strata.

*Family Well-being and Resilience:* The pandemic's impact on family well-being has been multifaceted. Measures like quarantine and lockdown led to loss of freedom of movement, economic hardship, and increased risks of non-communicable diseases due to disrupted clinical services and reduced food access. However, the pandemic also presented an opportunity for families to spend quality time together, fostering resilience. Resilience in this context refers to the ability of families to adapt and cope with adversity, such as stress and crisis, during tough times. Family resilience is bolstered by factors like adaptability, cohesion, good communication and financial management (Chen et.al, 2022). Positive parenting and social support are crucial for mitigating the negative impacts of the pandemic on family dynamics.

*Resignation and Resistance:* The widespread suffering evoked a spectrum of responses. Some people resigned to their fate, feeling powerless against the systemic forces at play. Others, however, resisted and fought for their rights, advocating for fairer policies and greater support for the vulnerable. This dynamic of resignation versus resistance reflects the complex interplay of personal agency and structural constraints in times of crisis. For some, the overwhelming nature of the crisis led to resignation. The pervasive sense of powerlessness stemmed from the realisation that the systemic forces at play were too vast and entrenched to combat individually. The pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, with many people losing their jobs and livelihoods. This economic hardship, coupled with the fear of illness and social isolation, led to a feeling of being trapped by circumstances beyond one's control. The resignation was not merely a passive acceptance but a survival mechanism in an environment where options seemed limited.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has served as a powerful catalyst for examining the deep-seated incongruencies within oneself as well as the inequalities and

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contradictions within our societies. Through the theoretical frameworks of cognitive dissonance, critical psychology and biopolitics, this research has shed light on the multifaceted impacts of the crisis and the diverse responses it has elicited. The dual dynamic of resignation versus resistance during the pandemic underscores the complex interplay between personal agency and structural constraints. While structural inequalities significantly shape individuals' experiences and responses, personal agency also plays a crucial role. The pandemic has highlighted the need for both individual and collective actions to navigate and challenge these constraints effectively. Resilience, adaptability, and advocacy for change have emerged as critical factors in resisting the adverse impacts of the pandemic. Families and communities that could leverage social support, maintain open communication, and adapt to changing circumstances were better positioned to foster resilience and resist resignation. Interestingly, the predominant themes reflected family-related issues, emphasising the significance of the family unit during times of crises. This underscores the importance of familial support and cohesion in navigating challenges and fostering resilience. Moving forward, addressing the root causes of inequality and injustice is paramount to building more just and equitable social systems. By recognising and confronting these issues, societies can better prepare for future crises and work towards creating more resilient and compassionate communities. Through collective action and solidarity, we can emerge stronger and more united in the face of adversity.

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