

Research Paper

## Exploring the Effects of Covid-19 on the Body Image, Mental Health and Interpersonal Relationships of College Students

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Covid-19 unexpectedly shocked the world in the year 2020 in terms of health when the Coronavirus caused millions of deaths globally. Due to the massive disruptions that have been caused in people's everyday life, the pandemic has had the potential to affect the lives of the students physically, financially, psychologically, academically and socially. The rationale of the study was to get down to the depths of understanding the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic had on college students and looked into the impact that it had on their body image issues, mental health and their interpersonal relationships with others. **Methodology:** The research was qualitative in nature and was analysed using thematic analysis. For the study, a total of 15 students between the ages of 18 and 24 were selected from different colleges using purposive sampling. Semi structured questions were used to collect data for the study. **Result:** 10 themes were taken out from the study. It was seen that most of the participants were dissatisfied with their body image and reported an increase in their levels of stress and anxiety as a result of Covid-19. In terms of Interpersonal relationships, while most of the participants said that their relationships with their family members had increased, all of them admitted that they had lost touch or become distant with at least one or more of their friends as a result of less social interaction. **Conclusions:** This study proposes to study the after effects of the pandemic on the mental health of the college students and their relationships with family as it could be an important field to explore.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Body Image, Mental Health, Interpersonal Relationships

### Research Question

The research questions of the study revolve around the impact of Covid 19 on the body image of college students and to understand how their mental health and interpersonal relationships have been affected and the possible ways and solutions that students made use of it to combat such situations.

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### **Rationale**

The rationale of the study is to get down to the depths of understanding the effect that the Covid- 19 pandemic has had on college students and to look into the impact that it has had on their body image issues, mental health and their interpersonal relationships with others. The research will take the interpretative approach. Since the study was done during the later half of 2021, it was helpful in determining the effects on the pandemic on these 3 variables in students and how their lives are still being affected during the later phases beyond the peak period.

### **Objectives**

The objective of the study is to help determine the effects of the pandemic on these 3 variables in students and how their lives are still being affected during the later phases beyond the peak period of Covid-19.

### **Introduction**

Covid-19 unexpectedly shocked the world in the year 2020 in terms of health when the Coronavirus caused millions of deaths globally. After being declared as a Pandemic by the World Health Organisation on March 12, 2020, most of the world shut down with several countries implementing total Lockdowns since quarantine and confinement at home were the only possible measures to curb the spread of the virus. With a very slow progress in the development of the vaccine and the number of cases rising by thousands, every day, schools, colleges and organisations shut down forcing students to attend online classes and people to work from home.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, Mental Health can be defined as health conditions that involve changes in the emotions, thinking pattern and behaviour of people. They are associated with distress and problems in the social, work or family aspect in a person's life. Due to the massive disruptions that have been caused in people's everyday life, the pandemic has had the potential to affect the lives of the students physically, financially, psychologically, academically and socially. Higher educational institutions have quickly switched to the online mode of teaching which has been very likely to increase stress levels among the students, especially for subjects and courses that were not meant and designed to be taught online (Kecojevic, Basch, Sullivan & Davi, 2020). With additional challenges such as the fear of contracting the Coronavirus, the safety of their family members and the stress resulting from confinement at home, the mental health of college students have been of rising concern with several students experiencing psychological and emotional distress.

Online classes and quarantine have also decreased the amount of physical activity done by the students every day. With no other outlet for relaxation or outings due to the lockdown, it is likely that students found food and eating as one of the very few pleasurable activities at home (Keel, Gomez, Harris, Kennedy, Ribeiro & Joiner, 2020).

With more eating activities and lesser physical exercise, there is a possibility of students developing body image issues thus affecting various self-concepts like self-esteem, self-worth thus in turn affecting the mental health of the student even more.

Body image can be defined as the extent to which people perceive the facts pertaining to their body. This perception of the body may lead the individual to feel either satisfied or dissatisfied with their body and are comprised of two components, namely, Body perception

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and Body Satisfaction. Body perception refers to the subjective knowledge of the person's physical attributes while body satisfaction refers to the degree to which a person is satisfied with his present body attributes. The level of body satisfaction determines the individual's degree of body confidence, self-esteem and body dissatisfaction (Tiwari & Kumar, 2015)

Good communication has always been the foundation of healthy relationships among people. During the lockdowns, students have not had the chance to communicate face to face with their peers or friends except for with their families (Taunton, 2020). According to Kelly (1983), in an interpersonal relationship, two or more people are interdependent on each other with the behaviour of one affecting the outcomes of the others. People from many different kinds of relationships with others. Some of them may be extremely close and intimate like parent-child, spouse- spouse relationships or may be formal relationships like neighbour-neighbour, teacher-student relationships. However, for all kinds of relationships, good communication holds a very important position in keeping these relationships healthy.

Quarantine has created new dependencies when it comes to communicating. People have started using online communication platforms and while these platforms were also made use Prior to the outbreak, the sole dependence on them to communicate everything one wants to say may have a lasting impact on that person's relationship with the other.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Schilder (1950), body image is the picture of our own body that a person forms in his/ her mind. It is the individual's perceptions, thoughts and feelings of his or her body. Body image can be divided into two aspects. A person could either have a positive image and perceptions of his body or a negative one. In recent times, negative body Image issues have been a rising concern. These body issues stem from various different influences including one's family, peer group but are mostly the result of bad or unhealthy eating habits. They may also be the reason for bad eating habits. With the outbreak of the Coronavirus and the effects of social isolation, feelings of anxiety, loneliness and boredom, along with little or no physical exercise may influence eating behaviour (Haddad, Zakhour, Kheir, Hachach, Sacre & Salameh, 2020). One study showed that majority of the people tend to eat more especially when they are stressed with around 80% of them changing and altering their calorie intake by either increasing or decreasing their consumption of food (Koball, Meers, Storfer-Isser, Domoff & Musher- Eizenman, 2012). With the unexpected changes that the Coronavirus has brought to the world, it can be most definitely said that there has been an increase in stress among individuals of all ages. Being a result of the pandemic that has most likely had an impact on the mental health of students, this may have resulted in eating more food and doing less exercise leading to weight disturbances (Rodriguez, Crespo & Olmedillas, 2020).

The mental health of the general public, a lot of whom are college and school students, are more likely to have been affected with the spread of the virus and the lockdown measure all over the world that has caused them to be isolated in their own homes. According to WHO (2020), lockdown which is a physical distancing measure in order to restrict movement, was adopted by several countries in order to slow down the spread of the virus. However, in spite of being an important measure to curb the spread of the Coronavirus, it had many unfavourable consequences in the social, economic and psychological aspects of life. In a research study done by Son, Hedge, Smith, Wang & Sasangohar (2020), around 195 students of a large public university in the US were interviewed to understand the effects of

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the pandemic on their mental health and their well-being. It was seen that around 138 (71%) of the students indicated an increase in their stress and anxiety due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Multiple stressors were identified that had contributed to the increase in the levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts among these students. Adding on to the already existing factors affecting the mental health of the students, such as the fear of contracting and spreading the virus to their family members and the increase in the academic pressures of online classes, there have been several instances of false information being circulated through online sources in many of the social media platforms used by these students, contributing further to the feelings of stress and anxiety among the students (Cuan-Baltazar, Muñoz-Perez, Robledo-Vega, Pérez-Zepeda, Soto-Vega, 2020). Research also showed that the psychological stress of the population was more serious in high-risk areas. With the development of the pandemic, people belonging to such areas went through several stages of panic, helplessness and acceptance. This study chose to look into Impact of Covid-19 on Body Image, Mental Health and Interpersonal Relationships of College Students since they are an important backbone of social development. The direction of social development can be easily affected due to the mental status of these students.

Not only is there a possibility of an increase in body image issues as a result of the impact of covid 19 on mental health, but there is also a possibility of a major change in interpersonal relations of these students. In a preliminary study done by Goodwin, Hou, Sun & Ben-Ezra (2020), it was found that even though relationships did not necessarily become more positive over the outbreak of Covid-19, the psychological stress and the impact of being in quarantine had mixed effects depending on the type of relationship. As a result of the measures that have been taken, the ways that people interact with each other have taken a dramatic turn. During pre-Covid times, people would meet up in supermarkets, offices, at home and meet each other informally. Now however, contact with people is very limited and somewhat fearful as the chances of contracting the virus from other people are high. Scheduled meetings via video conferencing apps are the most sought-after ways of communicating at this point of time (Fell, 2020). In the same preliminary study that was done, it was found that the high levels of stress brought about by the pandemic caused romantic intimate relationships to take a hit although non-romantic relationships had been positively impacted.

However, due to the fact that Covid-19 is an extremely recent event, there are very limited research studies that have been done to examine the impact of Covid-19 on the psychological health of students and how various factors have led to possible psychological distress among them. Most of the available literature focusing on the impact of the pandemic on students have focused on the roles of medical students and the other health professional students (Kecojevic et al., 2020). The research studies done on topics along these lines have also been quantitative studies, hence, they have not been able to explain how these factors have affected the students during the pandemic.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### *Sample*

Since the research will be focusing on the impact of Covid-19 on the perception of body image, the mental health and interpersonal relationships of college students, the participants of the study would be college going students both male and female. Though the mental health and body image of students of both genders are affected, stress and eating disorders are more common in women than men (Zhang, 2012) owing to various reasons such as societal norms

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and expectations to look and behave in a certain way (Akan & Grilo, 1995). Due to this, female participants will be selected to be more in number than males. All the participants will be aged between 18-24 and will be selected using purposive sampling. The sample will consist of around 15-20 students from various colleges in India.

### *Variables*

- **Covid 19 Pandemic:** Refers to the global health crisis that has taken place, resulting in sudden lockdowns, social isolation, loss of livelihood, loss of lives and growing uncertainty.
- **Body Image:** refers to the mental representation of one's body in both static and action aspects. It contains both cognitive and affective elements, such as how the body is perceived and known, and how the body is experienced and felt.
- **Mental Health:** It includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.
- **Interpersonal Relationships:** refers to the connections and interactions, especially ones that are socially and emotionally significant, between two or more people.

### *Data Collection*

Data was collected from 10 participants. Since it was qualitative research, data was collected using one of the most traditional methods, the interview method. Due to the ongoing pandemic, the interviews had to be scheduled online and were taken through the platform Zoom. All the participants agreed to have the interviews done in the form of video calls. These interviews were done till the data collected reached saturation point. For the interview, semi structured questions were formulated for each of the three variables after which they were sent for expert validation. Semi structured questions were used as they would allow the process to be more flexible and easier to collect information. They were then asked to the participants after which the data received was recorded. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants.

These interviews will be done until data is saturated.

### *Data Analysis*

Once the data was collected, it was closely and carefully observed through repeated listening. This allowed familiarity with the information collected. Once this was done, each of the interviews were carefully transcribed in written verbatim by the researcher. Once the data was transcribed, it was analysed through the process of Thematic Analysis. In this, Open Coding was done initially where the transcribed text was coded line by line. Axial Coding was then done.

Themes were then generated from the axial codes.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Out of 15 participants, 12 indicated that they were dissatisfied with the changes that their bodies went through during Covid-19. They expressed concern and unhappiness about their body image. 2 participants expressed that their perception of their body had remained the same while 1 participant said that her perception of her body had taken a positive turn and had improved. When it came to mental health, all 15 participants had expressed an increase in stress and anxiety due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. In terms of Interpersonal Relationships, 14 participants said that their relationships with their family had improved while all the

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participants admitted that they had lost touch or become distant from at least a few friends as a result of less or no social interaction.

### ***Body Image-***

The study showed that most participants had either stopped working out or had reduced the amount of time spent for physical activity after the implementation of the lockdown following Covid-19. All 15 participants agreed that there had been a disruption in their daily routine. According to them, they had been a lot more active before the onset of the pandemic due to regular classes and much more social interaction. However, now they stated that they spent more time sleeping and in their own rooms. While a couple of participants took the quarantine period as an opportunity to take care of their bodies and went through a transformation as a result of regular workouts and healthy eating, most of the participants claimed that they had gained weight. As a result, most of them showed clear dissatisfaction with the changes that their bodies went through due to the lack of physical exercise. 12 of the 15 participants mentioned that they had stopped working out while all the participants mentioned that they had become lethargic. As a result of this, 11 of the 15 participants mentioned that there had been a negative impact on their body image and that they had become extremely conscious of their bodies. One particular participant mentioned how she now feels conscious of herself especially when she tries out new clothes. They felt a constant need to become thin and would compare their bodies to old pictures where they looked comparatively thin. All 11 participants were extremely dissatisfied with how their bodies looked at present. A few of participants compensated for their lowered self-esteem by taking good care of their skin and focusing on healthy eating. 3 of the participants expressed that the quarantine had a positive impact on their body and that they were happy with how they looked. However, this feeling of happiness came after a long struggle of self-hate. The three participants had achieved self-acceptance and were finally able to accept themselves after a long struggle with body shaming by family and themselves.

### ***Mental Health-***

When it came to mental health, all 15 participants admitted to experiencing increased stress and anxiety as compared to their mental health before the pandemic. The reasons for the increased negative impact on their mental health had been many.

### ***Fear of the Virus***

A common cause for the negative impact on all the participant's mental health was the fear of contracting the virus. Among the 15 participants, 4 of them had already contracted the virus and had recovered at some point of time. Apart from being worried about their own health, all the participants were worried about either their family or friends being infected. Most of the participants had lost several close relatives and loved ones to the virus which in turn triggered their fear even more. All the participants admitted to constantly being worried for the safety of their loved ones with one participant even admitting that she had become paranoid about the health of her grandmother when she and the participant got infected at the same time.

### ***Negative News***

With the pandemic running in full force, the media and news channels seem to have played a huge role in negatively impacting the mental health of most of the participants. With millions of cases and deaths being reported from India and all across the world, watching the statistics and the coverage of the happenings across the globe caused fear and stress in the

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minds of the participants and their families. One of the participants mentioned how she spent all her days at home dreading each phone call as she did not know what news to expect, having lost a few relatives to Covid-19. Another participant mentioned how after a while, he and his family completely stopped watching the news as it was doing nothing but stirring fear in his family.

Watching the stories about how people were suffering and dying, played with the minds of a few participants who admitted feeling helpless with a feeling of giving up.

### *Unsurely about Professional Life*

With the long break given to the participants as a result of Covid-19, 5 participants claimed that this break from college was a time of self-reflection for them in terms of their careers and professional lives. However, this period turned out to contribute to increasing the amount of stress for all 5 participants. These participants reflected that with all the time given to them to think, they were extremely unsure about what to do with their professional lives or if they were doing the right thing in life. They doubted their choices and were extremely stressed about what to do next after finishing their courses. One participant claimed that she sometimes felt like she had wasted 3 years of her life doing the wrong course and wondered if she even liked the subject, she was majoring in. Another participant just graduated with an engineering degree and said that he had no idea what to do next. He was confused whether to start working or if he should study further. A third client was also pressured by his family to give up a job offer in order to do his higher studies as a result of which he was dissatisfied and stressed with his current life scenario.

### **Academics**

13 of the 15 participants claimed that they had faced extreme stress when it came to academics. With the commencement of online classes, these participants only faced extreme stress with an increase in pressure regarding their college attendance, online classes, exams and assignments. A couple of participants claimed that their college had become more strict with respect to the mentioned factors such as attendance, exams and assignments that it was taking a toll on their mental health. One participant expressed anger directed towards her disorganized department which had suddenly announced exams. All the participants preferred offline classes as they felt that they were learning nothing with online classes as it was easy to get distracted. One participant claimed that she was forced to do on field internships in spite of heavy reporting of Covid-19 cases, which in turn negatively affected her, causing her panic attacks and anxiety since she was scared for her mother's health. Some of the participants had faced extreme pressure with respect to college admissions during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Only 2 participants claimed that even though academically they felt a little pressured, it had not affected their mental health much.

### *Decreased Social Interaction*

Not being able to meet their friends and extended family in person had a negative impact on all the participants, particularly those who were used to staying out of their houses most of the time before the pandemic. The participants mentioned that not being able to meet their peers had tremendously impacted the way they attended their classes. They also missed spending time with their friends as they were forced to stay at their own homes for months together. This caused a negative impact on them as their daily amount of social interaction

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decreased to nothing. Staying at home all day also seems to have had an impact on the participant's mental health. Although 6 of the participants enjoyed being at home and spending time with their families, all of the participants struggled with an increased number of family conflicts which in turn increased their levels of stress. One participant mentioned that her family could not understand the concept of privacy due to which she felt that her personal space was invaded all the time. This in turn caused her to crave more social interaction outside her home which was not possible.

### **Anger Outbursts**

11 out of the 15 participants mentioned how their increased negative mental health had caused them to have more frequent anger outbursts as compared to before the pandemic. The combined stress of academics, fear of the virus, social media and news channels and decreased social interaction together played a role in causing the participants to have a negative reaction to the stress. They admitted becoming more sensitive and having more and more anger outbursts. One participant mentioned that she had started getting angry almost every day due to the constant pressures and stressors induced into her life after the onset of the pandemic.

### ***Interpersonal Relationships-* Increased Family Time**

All the participants said that their family quality time had increased as a result of staying at home for months together. Although a couple of participants admitted that they had found it difficult to adjust at home again, they soon settled down. One participant admitted that she had not found any time for herself and self-care as her family members were very intrusive and did not leave her alone for a single minute, which she found very irritating. Another participant said that her family made efforts to play games, watch movies and spend less time on their phones in order to improve the quality time spent by them. According to the participants, communication had increased between the family members during the time spent at home. A couple of participants also mentioned how this period of time had helped them become the closest to their siblings.

### **Increase in Family Conflicts**

Although family time had increased, all the participants did face an increase in conflicts at home between the family members. A participant admitted that before the pandemic, there used to be more misunderstandings at home due to which she preferred to stay outside with her friends and only return at night. However, during the lockdown period, her family had really gotten to know each other better and were making efforts to understand each other's perspectives. This was the case for most of the other participants due to which, they said that their communication with their families had improved much more. According to another participant, the feeling of not being understood by parents had increased during the quarantine period as a result of which she started taking therapy. However, therapy was helping her make better connections and communication with her family members and relatives. Although the number of conflicts had increased at home, each family member was trying to communicate their point of view in a better way than what was reported by the participants.

### **Connection with Friends**

11 of the 15 participants reported making efforts to stay in touch with their friends in spite of limited or no in person interaction. The participants tried to keep in touch with their close



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friends by playing virtual games, having virtual movie nights and doing regular video and phone calls. Since their social life had come to a halt, these participants said that they found it important to stay in touch through the means that they could. However, most of the participants also admitted becoming distant or losing contact with at least 1-2 friends. One participant claimed that the quarantine period made her realize how she had the right to choose friends who were good for her as a result of which she chose to lose contact with some people. Another participant added that he was not good at keeping in touch with people virtually due to which he struggled to stay in contact with his friends. However, most of the participants claimed that their relationships with friends had taken a positive turn even if in the slightest way during the pandemic with others reporting that they had lost contact with a few friends.

### *Coping Mechanisms-*

All the participants mentioned different ways and methods that they had used to cope up with the feelings of stress and negative emotions. While most of them used the age-old methods of listening to music, watching movies with friends, doing their favourite hobbies and spending time with their families, there were some who also used destructive coping mechanisms like stress eating and oversleeping. A couple of participants had also started taking therapy in order to help them cope up with the various changes made in their lives as a result of the pandemic. Regular video calls and phone calls and virtual games were also mentioned to be coping mechanisms by the participants. According to 3 participants, they had also started trying out new hobbies to help themselves feel better as a result of which they felt more open to try out new things. All in all, most of the participants used healthy coping strategies except for a couple of them who chose to use coping mechanisms that were slightly harmful.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The students participating in the study were not by any means coerced into taking part in the study. Consent forms were sent out and participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point of time. Details of the participant were kept confidential and the data provided by him/her were taken back to the participant in order to avoid misrepresentation or misinterpretation of data. It was ensured that no harm was done to the participant and that any kind of participation was completely voluntary.

### *Limitations and Future Work*

Although the study aimed to understand the in-depth details of how the pandemic had affected college students, there were certain limitations to the study. Firstly, the sample size of the study was very small as a result of which, the results gained from it cannot be generalized for the entire student population. However, reasonable generalizability of these findings are expected. Secondly, the number of female participants in this study were more as a result of which male representation in this study was not equal to the female representation.

In terms of future work that could be done in this field, the effects of the pandemic on the mental health and the interpersonal relationships of the students in the much later phase after the peak period could be explored as this study focused mainly on the peak period of the pandemic. The after effects of the pandemic on the mental health of the college students and their relationships with family could be an important field to explore.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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