

Studying the Trends of Cognitive Dissonance in Young Adults in Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper aims at understanding, measuring and analyzing the cognitive dissonance and the impact that it has on the young-adults from the age of 18 to 25. It is focused on giving an Indian context to the topic based on 5 different spheres of a Gen-Z person – personal relationship, academic environment, professional working environment, health and nutrition, and personal life thoughts/functioning. **Design/Methodology/Approach** : Around 105 participants from the age of 18 to 25 (Gen-Z cluster from the population) were selected and asked to fill a cognitive dissonance questionnaire that included statements in the form of situations from their day-to-day lives. They were asked to answer each question by selecting one option off the 5-point Likert scale and the data, along with certain pieces of literatures (such as research papers, articles, journals, etc.) were analyzed. **Findings:** Through the study, we can see that there is an increased presence of dissonance amongst the Gen-Z community and that there is a higher rate or intensity of dissonance in the young-adults along the spheres of academic environments and health & nutrition with an average rate of 77% and 75% respectively. **Practical Implications/Recommendations:** The findings from this study can be used to understand the behavior of Indian young-adults from a modern 2023 context and can also help in converting the theoretical findings into a practical model that can be used for personality upliftment, academic and work motivation or satisfaction, mental health wellbeing, etc.

Keywords: *Cognitive Dissonance, Personal Relationships, Academic Environment, Professional Working Environment, Health and Nutrition, Personal Life Thoughts/Functioning*

An overarching youth problem – not just in India
India has almost 50% of its population below 25 years old, which is almost the equivalent of 100% of most country's population. While 41.5% of the youth want to be happy, the proportion of those who know the methods to condition their mind in the right way is comparatively less. There is where cognitive dissonance plays a massive important role. To understand the youth is equivalent to understand the community's progress. Over 10% of the youth population in the world are suffering from stress because of academics, 59% suffer due to household activities, and more such facts are all due to concepts such as Dissonance and Cognitive Dissonance.

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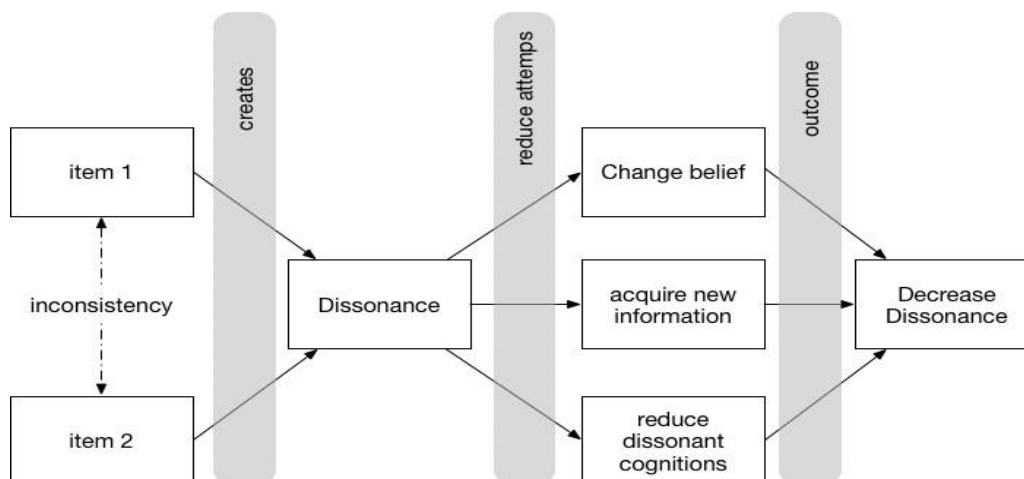
While dissonance is an overall understanding of when two or more factors of the environment (either internal or external relative to a person) clashes with each other, cognitive dissonance is focused more on the psychological aspect with regards to cognition. Cognitive dissonance is the feeling of unease or discomfort that a person feels when their behavior, thoughts, actions, etc. do not align with their beliefs or values or base thought. It can occur when a person holds contradictory thoughts in their mind at the same time.

For instance, a chain-smoker would continue to smoke despite knowing the harmful effects of smoking and would even profess to not smoke despite being a smoker himself. This happens from a young age in human and is seen in all environments, professional to personal.

History of Cognitive Dissonance Theory

There have been multiple researches about the theories and understanding of cognitive dissonance. The first known understanding of cognitive dissonance was stated almost as back as 60 or more years ago in Leon Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Festinger, 1962). Festinger postulated that pairs of cognition (elements of knowledge) can be relevant or irrelevant to one another. Causes of dissonance can occur when opposite thoughts, in lay man's terms, contradict one another. Hence to give an objective to dissonance we can say that there is an existence of discrepancy between two thoughts. And something has to be done to remove it to accommodate the two thoughts or one particular thought of the two or more contradicting patterns of thought. People seek consistency, and want to be in line with the values and beliefs that they believe is right. (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). Comfort can only arise when things are aligned with what people think is right for them and is in line with their vision.

Following in his theory of cognitive dissonance theory (CDT), Festinger states that cognition refers to any form knowledge, opinion or belief, about someone or something in an environment. Irrelevance is when the thoughts have no effects on one another and can remain independently stored in the memory. Consonance and dissonance of cognitions deals with whether or not the thoughts or actions are in line or not. While consonants can be one cognitive element, thought, action or value following another in harmony or mutual betterment, dissonant can be the opposite of one cognition following the other. Dissonant inadvertently causes psychological discomfort, and the greater the magnitude of dissonance greater is the pressure to reduce the pressure caused by the dissonance.



(Fig.1: The Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) by Leon Festinger) (Gaya, 2017)

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After a lot of reiterations and re-writing the theory of cognitive dissonance has new shapes and understanding such as Cooper & Fazio (Cooper & Fazio, 1984) who proposed the idea that the discomfort experienced in dissonance experiments was not due to an inconsistency between the individual's cognition, but rather to feeling personally responsible for producing an aversive consequence. They stated, "Dissonance has precious little to do with the inconsistency among cognitions per se, but rather with the production of a consequence that is unwanted" (Cooper & Fazio, 1984). Apart from just understanding about the different thoughts and actions, there was also cognitive dissonance in attitude change, and works also in understanding the social elements of environment.

Social psychology has understood different theories that have a sound base of dissonance. Elliot Aronson (Aronson, 1969) gave an insight that a number of social psychological theories, such as self-affirmation theory and guilt, could be thought of as different forms of dissonance. In addition to this, much research and theory concerned with guilt (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994) and self-regulation could be understood from the perspective of dissonance. Incorporation of the key variables and past research of dissonance theory into these and other research enterprises will likely benefit and lead to a more cumulative psychological theories surrounding dissonance and sociology. The study of dissonance and the theories that followed were developed to understanding human tendencies and nature in psychology and sociological constructs. Cognitive dissonance theory is not just used in researches underlying social psychology but also in the approaches used to explain social behaviors. Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) has been frequently applied to the social science literature to explain and predict the motivational nature of dissonance in producing attitude and behavior change in decision making and the broader social community context. (Hinojosa, Gardner, Walker, & Coglisier, 2017)

This particular paper tries to understand the different social elements of a young-adult, or the population who belong to the Gen-Z category (those whose birth years are from 1997 to 2013). The elements include dissonance in relationships, academic environments (such as schools, institutions, universities, etc.), professional working environments, health and nutrition and personal life mindset. The paper also focuses on understanding the same in an Indian context, shedding more light into the why's for Indian young-adults.

Statement of the problem

Understanding the ways to measure dissonance in young-adults is of vital importance as it can play a major role in shaping the different spheres surrounding one's daily life. Experiments and research on dissonance have been extensively around socio-cultural lifestyle of a larger population, mostly in a country-based population or a specific academic or social orientation. Even though the study of cognitive dissonance is done on a larger scale with a few experiments dealing with precisely selected population, no research on the dissonance of Indian population has ever been done. This study aims at addressing the gap in the literature by providing a basic criteria analysis of cognitive dissonance that contributes to a young-adult's daily life.

Objectives of the study

1. Understanding the level cognitive dissonance and/or intensity of dissonance in a young- adult's life
2. Identifying the factor of a young-adult's life that involves the most dissonant and the most consonants

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3. Providing insight into the behavior and actions of a young-adult based on internal or external environmental cues
4. Contributing to the social welfare and developmental schemes of teenagers and young- adults in schools, universities, institutes, homes/houses, etc.
5. Contributing to the continuing discussion and research on the topics of cognitive dissonance

Hypothesis (Cognitive Dissonance)

Since the study deals with the measurement of dissonance in 5 different spheres of a young-adult, the objective of the hypothesis to understand the significance of the dissonance factor in each factor or spheres. Hence the Hypothesis would be:

Null Hypothesis

There is no significantly higher number of dissonances measured in the young-adult's life across all 5 spheres.

Alternate Hypothesis

There is significantly higher number of dissonances measured in the young-adult's life across all 5 spheres.

METHODOLOGY

The approach to the study was based on data collection and reviewing of prior published pieces of literature done in a meticulous manner. The methodology is as follows:

1. Firstly, a meticulous understanding of the topic was done through literary review of research papers, journals and articles, national health and/or educational websites, etc. that were published based on the study at hand.
2. The findings and the theories connected to the study were noted as the data collection process was started by understanding the core variables, scales and sub-scales of the topic.
3. The questionnaire created included questions of all 5 spheres – personal relationships, academic environment, professional/working environment, health and nutrition, & personal life thoughts.
4. The sampling technique used in the following study is Clustered Sampling technique and the sample (cluster) was chosen to be young-adults or Gen-Z individuals who are of the ages of 18-25. The data was collected through a virtual mode and the questionnaire was sent out to the respective cluster through virtual mediums.
5. The questionnaire included qualitative questions that included statements which was formatted in lay man's terms and the statements were made simple for the participants.
6. to be comfortable putting themselves into the shoes of the situation given by the statement.
7. The data was then collated, and then analyzed to get the final results and understand the measurement of cognitive dissonance in the Gen-Z cluster.

Research of the different spheres surrounding a young-adult

To start off with, from a developmental point of view, taking pointers from Erikson's developmental theory we can see that he postulated that adulthood constitutes one of the critical stages in development. Based on the same, we can arrive at a modern understanding (in Indian context) that there are 5 major sub-scales or qualities or spheres of a young-adult's life that is being measured in this study. Each of the sphere are integral part to a

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young person's mental health, capacity and understanding and diving deeper into what are the major causes of the dissonance and which factor holds the maximum dissonance in Gen-Z individuals is important to note and analyze.

Personal Relationships

One of the key social factors of a Gen-Z person is the relationship with the peers, partners, friends, parents, etc. Personal relationships for young-adults are synonymous to unexplored waters for them. It is not just about understanding the emotional quotient that bonds two or more people but also the appropriate use of emotional intelligence. Individuals who lack experience or training face more cognitive dissonance due to the presence of uncomfortable environment (Ramaswami & Saravanakumar, 2017). Emotions not just help in the relationship boosting but also in the learning capabilities of an individual. Since cognitive dissonance can lead to emotional states that are caused by the clashing of polar opposite thoughts, actions or beliefs, it is proven that the inconsistency between the thought components may motivate people to engage in actions that will help minimize that pressure (Al-Adamat & Atoum, 2022). This base concept is also true for relationships where conflicting or polar opposite thoughts can lead to unnecessary consequences or dissonance in the relationship, leading to actions – either positive or negative – which will help in reducing the dissonance faced. In different words, disharmony can be reduced when one feels accountable for bringing knowledge into inconsistent or incompatible relationships, this idea also suggests personal responsibility (Wicklund & Brehm, 1976).

Academic Environments

Different environmental cues, both on offices or schools, have different stimuli that trigger thoughts, activities, etc. that are dissonant or consonant. Various researches have been put into understanding cognitive dissonance in the classroom, of schools and colleges and have also played a vital role in understanding values such as hypocrisy and honesty. Cognitive dissonance is seen as an approach for instructors to address and solve issues regarding classroom discipline, cheating and hypocrisy. Since dissonance brings about the need to maintain consistency in the actions or beliefs, students undergo an attitude change which involves them getting into activities such as cheating and hypocrisy (Goldenowicz, 2014). Researches on classroom experience based on cognitive dissonance is also a prevalent field of cognitive studies in the educational sector. Taking one particular type of academic factor – namely the process of learning something new - (Bowman & Brendenberger, 2012) re-conceptualized the college experience to be a context with the potential of creating change in an individual at a basic or conceptual level due to exposure to new & unfamiliar fields or terrain. By exploring new ways of thinking, beliefs, and values, individuals have the opportunity to review their own, and form their unique, more sophisticated perspectives, contributing to the overarching and their own personal conceptual development.

Professional Working Environments

As far as we have read, we can understand that polar opposite consonants can lead to dissonance. The examples of the same under a professional working environment is seen at a large number, due to existence of workplace conflict management, HR management styles, management theories, and various organizational theories and/or working styles. A research based on understanding cognitive dissonance antecedents and workplace effects by Shah (Shah & Lacaze, 2020) process that cognitive dissonance is induced in an employee when the employee faces feelings of role ambiguity and role conflicts. Psychological discomfort on all levels of hierarchy, be it on the same level, above or below, are all dissonance inducing factors in a working environment. Ethical conflicts and burnouts (mentally and

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physically) are all also factors of dissonance that can lead to negative effects in the functioning of a company or organization.

Health & Nutrition

The potential application of cognitive dissonance to eating/food attitude and behavior may be taken from the writings of some food or nutrition researchers. In a study of consumers of organic food products, (Hjelmar, 2011) reported that respondents expressed the view that television documentaries can be so unpleasant that they make you change your behavior instantly; you simply cannot continue to eat conventional pork after having seen how pigs are treated, leading him to suggest that reflexive shopping practices can be sparked by life events (e.g., having children), shocking news about conventional food products and similar events, and news capable of creating a cognitive dissonance among consumers. The study of cognitive dissonance related to eating/food attitudes and behaviors in the food and nutrition domain has been relatively under-developed, particularly with respect to influencing healthy food behaviors in the area of public health.

Personal Thinking and Functioning/Life Thoughts

This is fairly easy to understand for a young-adult but difficult to measure through another person's point of view. The mind has a vast region of explorable potential and with technological and neurological developments it is easier to understand the different thought processes and how to use them for the betterment of people going through pressure and stress. For a young-adult, there are various stressor and various questions that takes place in the mind and these are tend to cause internal conflicts, confusions and questions, leading to dissonance in the thoughts themselves, hence making it invaluable to measure and understand.

Brief description of the tool used

One of the key limitations of this study was that there was no availability of simple standardized tools for testing cognitive dissonance through situational (statement) based questions. This became an imperative point in this study hence the tool was developed solely for this study purpose only. This tool included the following:

Table 1: Tool Description for the Cognitive Dissonance study

#.	Factor	No. of Items
1	Dissonance in Relationships	5
2	Dissonance in Academic Environments	5
3	Dissonance in Professional Working Environments	5
4	Dissonance in Health and Nutrition	5
5	Dissonance in Individual Life or Personal Thoughts	5

Data Collected

Demographics

Based on the data that is collected, the gender distribution is as follows:

Table 2: Gender distribution in the study responses

	Male	Female	Others	Unlisted	Total
Number	42	63	1	0	106
%age.	39.62%	59.4%	0.9%	0	100%

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Based on the data that is collected, the age frequency is as follows:

Table 3: Age distribution in the study responses

	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	Unlisted	Total
Frequency	13	25	35	17	10	2	1	2	1	106
%age.	12.22%	23.58%	33.01%	16.03%	9.4%	1.8%	0.9%	1.8%	0.9%	100%

RESULT

The mean and the standard deviation of the generated responses and data are as follows:

Table 4: Mean & Standard Deviation of the collated data

#.	Factor	Measurement
1	Mean	77.24
2	Standard Deviation	9.57

From the data analysis we can see that the mean is 77.24, and can be used as the mean score for comparison. Since the aim of the paper is to understand the effect of cognitive dissonance in different people of the Gen-Z category we will also take the range of measurement to better understand the sub-cluster in which they fall under.

Table 5: Range of dissonance measurement based on scores

Range Type	Range
Lower Dissonance	<70
Average Dissonance	71 to 80
Higher Dissonance	>80

With the above range in mind, we can arrive at the frequency of the participants in each sub cluster of dissonance –

Table 6: Frequency distribution of sub-cluster categories

Range Type	Frequency
Lower Dissonance	25
Average Dissonance	40
Higher Dissonance	41

Since we are also dealing with individual spheres of a young-adult's life and seeing the dissonance in each of them as well, the analysis and results of the same was taken after the conductance of the ANOVA test.

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Table 7.1 & 7.2: ANOVA test results and f ratio calculation

Summary of Data						
	Treatments					
	1	2	3	4	5	Total
N	106	106	106	106	106	530
ΣX	1289	1702	1992	1591	1613	8187
Mean	12.1604	16.0566	18.7925	15.0094	15.217	15.447
ΣX^2	17251	28098	38142	24927	25793	134211
Std.Dev.	3.8745	2.7074	2.5957	3.1577	3.4476	3.8263

Result Details				
Source	SS	df	MS	
Between-treatments	2396.6528	4	599.1632	<i>F</i> = 58.81433
Within-treatments	5348.3679	525	10.1874	
Total	7745.0208	529		

The f-ratio value is 58.81455. The p-value is <0.0001. The result is significant at $p < .05$.

We can also see the frequency of the number of people falling in the different sub-cluster categories even in the individual spheres as well.

Table 8.1: Frequency distribution of Personal Relations

Range Type	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Lower Dissonance	5 – 11	50	47.16%
Average Dissonance	12 – 18	50	47.16%
Higher Dissonance	19 – 25	6	5.66%

Table 8.2: Frequency distribution academic environments

Range Type	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Lower Dissonance	5 – 11	3	2.8%
Average Dissonance	12 – 18	82	77.35%
Higher Dissonance	19 – 25	21	19.81%

Table 8.3: Frequency distribution of working professional environments

Range Type	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Lower Dissonance	5 – 11	0	0%
Average Dissonance	12 – 18	45	42.45%
Higher Dissonance	19 – 25	61	57.54%

Table 8.4: Frequency distribution of health and nutrition

Range Type	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Lower Dissonance	5 – 11	14	13.20%
Average Dissonance	12 – 18	80	75.47%
Higher Dissonance	19 – 25	12	11.32%

Table 8.5: Frequency distribution of personal life thoughts or functioning

Range Type	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Lower Dissonance	5 – 11	17	16.03%
Average Dissonance	12 – 18	72	67.92%
Higher Dissonance	19 – 25	17	16.03%

DISCUSSION

Based on the above findings, we can understand that dissonance all 5 spheres of a young-adult have factors of dissonance and exists between being moderately present or highly present in the minds of a Gen-Z individual. The Quantitative Analysis involved using descriptive statistics like mean and standard deviation. And the one-way test of ANOVA (Analysis of Variance). ANOVA is used to test differences among the means of the population by examining the amount of variation within each sample relative to the amount of variation between the samples. Since there are 5 distinct spheres, and 5 distinct values given by the participants ANOVA test seemed the most appropriate for this study.

We can see from the above that:

1. The average propensity for having dissonance amongst individuals of the Gen-Z cluster is either moderate or high in intensity.
2. While spheres such as personal relations do not seem to have a higher dissonance causing effect, spheres such as academics and work environment, health and nutrition and personal life functioning are all proof that moderate to high levels/intensity of dissonance is present in young-adults whilst interacting with elements of that sphere or environment.
3. The two most prominent dissonance causing spheres are of:
 - a. Academic Environment (an average of 77%)
 - b. Health and Nutrition (an average of 75%)
4. This can suggest that a young-adult is most faced with unease and discomfort along the lines of academic performance, health and nutrition and related issues. This can cause positive or negative effects in the spheres surrounding the person.
5. There is a significance in the result, since the p value is lower than .05, which shows that the results are significant. There is a significant difference between the cognitive dissonances seen in all the 5 different spheres.
6. This proves the alternate hypothesis that there is a significant difference when the overall overarching 5 spheres of a young-adult's life is seen.

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Suggestions

Even though the study was done through a meticulous method, there are more suggestions that can be added to the study to make it more effective on a long-term basis.

- a) Usage of more standardized tools through exploratory and interdisciplinary studies.
- b) Development of new standardized psychometric tools that is focused towards young-adults and measuring cognitive dissonance.
- c) Diving deeper into age based and gender-based dissonance studies amongst students in schools and colleges.
- d) Diving deeper into studying the trends of cognitive dissonance in the health and nutrition sector, and the underlying consumer behavior of various food items.
- e) Developing newer models of dissonance focused more on learning and development and curating the same for practical applications in schools and colleges through curriculums and schooling.

Limitations

- a) Since the study was done based on a personal questionnaire, there was no availability of standardized questionnaire for testing and conducting the study.
- b) There was no age distribution control done through the study, hence there may be discrepancies in the data analysis based on the gender distribution.
- c) There may be various differences based on the Indian population and can have various different factors apart from the spheres or factors that are researched on currently.

CONCLUSION

Cognitive dissonance is an everyday effect that a person of any age faces in almost all of his/her/their everyday activities. This study helps us understand the different ways to identify the dissonant in a young-adult's life and how it is differing with an Indian context. This can help in adding on to the overall quality of life that a Gen-Z citizen can have and is also open for more research-based opportunities.

I have analyzed and arrived at a conclusion that there are various factors that can prove that dissonant do occur in large or moderate intensity in a young person's life and the significant difference in the scores approves the Alternate Hypothesis.

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Conflict of Interest

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