A Systematic Review of the Impact of COVID-19 on Indian working professionals (Millennial and Gen Z)

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"What is irony?" asked man,

"A world, starving for a touch that would destroy it!" replied the Earth.

Abstract: The paper aimed at understanding the psycho-social impact of Covid-19 on working Indian millennials and Gen Z. The study was designed as a systematic reviews based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines. The researchers mutually decided upon an exclusion and inclusion criteria based on which the papers, addressing the objective were to be searched. It was also decided that along with research papers, grey literature (newspaper articles and e-blogs) too would be utilised. The search process that commenced in September 2021 and continued till January 2022 identified 53 articles combining both research papers and grey literature. Out of these, only 5 could be retained as per the inclusion criteria. It is also interesting to note that all these 5 articles are a part of grey literature. Limitations, uncertainty and insecurity, emotional and psychological fatigue and resilience were identified as the four major themes emerging from the accepted articles. The limitations and future scopes of the study have been discussed.

Keywords: Covid-19, Gen Z, Millennials, Psycho-social impact, Systematic review, Working professionals

INTRODUCTION

It was a century back that India had lived amidst the horrors of the Spanish flu, the infamous epidemic that claimed over 10 million lives in 1918 (Chakrabarty, 2020). With advancement in the medical sciences and pan disciplinary research, a feeling of being invincible settled down not just in India but across the world. The pain and trauma of the epidemic stood obsolete in the consciousness of the country until the dawn of the year 2020. With the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, the world witnessed a change in the concept of normal. The lavish office buildings were reduced to moving images on laptop screens, the busy roads and streets hustling with crowds went into a perpetual state of mute; home, quite literally became the world and time stuck to the dates on which the lockdowns were announced for different states. As if the modern amenities had not distanced people enough, they were now forced into a social distancing.

Along with living with the physical inconveniences caused due to the pandemic, the uncertainty spewed into the lives of the people added to the horror. The human brain keeps updating the individual with the world outside and it is safe and unsafe side. However, in a pandemic, the brain's disdain for uncertainty makes it create an array of untested stories, bombarding it with danger signals every now and then (Macapagal, 2020). A heightened level of stress adds fuel to fire. Stress caused by separation from loved ones, home arrest and a persistent sense of helplessness pulls them to the gallows of suicidal ideations (Saladino, Algeri &Auriemma, 2020). People lived under such psychological threat for a year and a half. One may also wonder if the situation faced by the Indian collective was any different from those of the other nationalities. The answer would be a firm 'yes.' The measure of social distancing, that was the primary instrument to curb the pandemic, blew life into some social horrors of antiquity. It resurfaced the notion of the 'other.' It brought back the old fissures of narrow mindedness and a psycho-sociological fear of the other which posed a serious threat to our solidarity (Bhatt, 2020).

The inconveniences experienced by the pandemic had intergenerational differences. We could begin with the younger group that comprised school goers and young professionals. For the school goers, the rampant shutting down of schools shifted education to an online mode, which posed a financial challenge for many. Those looking forward to their first salary were throttled by a disruption in economic opportunities, family stress and a sense of uncertainty about their future which gnawed at their subjective well-being quite brutally (Sarkar, Sahatqija and Kyo, 2021). Things were slightly different for the older group. Low levels of adaptive capacity, a spike in the anxiety levels owing to an increase in the lockdown timelines, emotional and financial losses and a perception of unpredictability affected their psychological wellbeing (Gopal, Sharma and Subramanyam, 2020). For those who belonged to the elder most age band, anxiety was

experienced mostly due to the issue of comorbidity translating into a feeling of vulnerability to death (United Nations Report, 2020).

Among the various sectors in a country, the workplace gathers paramount importance. With work shifting from the tables in the offices to the households, people were deprived of human interaction and a professional environment which hampered collaboration, leadership, and managerial competencies. It thus posed new challenges of sustaining human performance, experience, and wellbeing (Report by JLL, 2021). It is also important to establish at this point the importance of millennial in the organisational context. Millennial are those born anywhere from 1981 to 1995 (Thangavel and Pathak, 2021). Millennial are critical for business in the coming days. Their career aspirations, attitudes about work, and knowledge of new technologies shall define the culture of the 21st century workplace (Report by PWC, 2020). From the organisational viewpoint therefore, they are sought after, needed and indispensable (Raines, 2002). Along with the millennial, the Gen Z or post millennial are too on the rise with respect to occupying the organisational territories. The Gen Z are those born anywhere from 1996 to 2012 (Thangavel and Pathak, 2021). Gen Z individuals have begun their entry into various workplaces and it would be a mistake for the employers to consider them a subset of the millennial group. They are considered to have a finer sense of their expectations from their workplaces than their millennial counterpart and shall comprise at least 30% of the workforce by 2020, making it quintessential for managers to recognize who they are and the ways they think (Gaidhani, Arora and Sharma, 2019).

Since the aim of this body of work is to understand the impact of COVID - 19 from the Indian organisational lens, it only makes sense to compare the effect of the pandemic on the various generations of the workforce. It is said that the pandemic was a heavy blow to the employment status of the young workers. They experienced the hardest hit in the face of the lockdown and recovered at a very slow rate. However, the older workers remained unscathed by the second wave. Moreso, their recovery rate was quite steady even in the first phase of the pandemic (Abraham, 2021). The youngest cohorts at the workplace, the Gen Z, were experiencing adulthood at a time when their future seemed the bleakest, with zero experience to their benefit. The older task force in comparison had their experience to their advantage. The valuable experience they had earned by virtue of their longer association with the professional world worked as a safety net of sorts to facilitate them with a multitude of perspectives to tackle change (Jha, 2021). The millennial generation has been known by different names - 'the burnout generation,' ones living 'the hustle and grind culture' and the like. The pandemic added salt to the wounds of these professionals by blurring the boundaries between work hours and personal life. Worst hit among the worst hits were the working women of this age group. Most of them either missed a job opportunity or a raise or a promotion owing to the aspect of gender (Ghoshal, 2021).

Thus, the lash of the pandemic we felt as a nation had prominent psychological and social hues in addition to the economic one. The workforce stood at the crossroads where these hues fused into one, creating a more daunting challenge for them. Therefore, to understand and empathise fully with the challenges the Indian workforce faced and spreading awareness about their psycho-sociological hurdles in the pandemic era gathers prime importance. It is also important to understand that the hurdles were the toughest for those who were the largest and the youngest task force at work - the millennial and the Gen Z. This knowledge would help organisations effectively harness the potentials of such a dynamic workforce in times unpredictable like never before. Thus, exploring the impact of COVID-19 on Indian working professionals (Millennial and Gen Z) from a psycho-sociological perspective spearheaded the spirit of inquiry for this research.

Briefly, our work aimed to achieve two objectives. Firstly, to explore the current knowledge reservoir of the impact of COVID- 19 on Millennial and Gen Z working professionals of our country. Secondly, to find some gaps, if any, between the territories of the work life explored and those left unexplored, revealing scopes for further research. To hit the bull's eye, we conducted a systematic review which consisted of scientific studies and grey literature.

METHOD

Design

Systematic reviews are based on objective, rigorous criteria that allow transparency and replicability by other researchers. What sets it apart from the usual studies and reviews is that it systematically eliminates the possibilities of a bias (Tranfield and Smart, 2003). The importance of systematic reviews lies in identifying gaps in the knowledge base and providing a solid ground for undertaking new research initiatives to address those gaps (Cooper, Jones and Sutton, 2005). For this study a systematic review was conducted based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses called PRISMA. It is an evidence-based minimum set of items for reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses. It primarily focuses on the reporting of reviews evaluating the effects of interventions, but can also be used as a basis for reporting systematic reviews with objectives other than evaluating interventions (e.g. evaluating aetiology, prevalence, diagnosis or prognosis) (PRISMA, 2021). These guidelines are mostly for medical and allied research but it was felt that they provide a robust format for literature from the area of organisational research too (Daniels, 2018).

Literature Search

The study could be divided into three phases. The first phase dealt with identification of the databases from which the studies were to be extracted from. The databases included two sources - academic databases consisting of Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science, and, grey literature which consisted of information produced outside of traditional publishing and distribution channels, including reports, policy literature, working papers, newsletters, government documents, E Newspapers and articles (McKenzie, 2022).

Selection of Studies and Outcomes

The second phase began with defining the sample for the studies. This began with a detailed scouting and selection process through which an exclusion and inclusion criteria were created. The selection of the studies was completed based on the extended version of the PICO (population, intervention, control, and outcomes) format. The PICO format is commonly used in evidence-based clinical practice. However, it suited the context of our study as it supported the creation of 'well-built' questions that identified four concepts namely: population, the intervention (if there is one), the comparison (if there is one), and the outcome(s) (VCU Research Guides, 2022). Keeping the objectives of our study in mind, the inclusion criteria for the population included working professionals who belonged to the age group 18 - 24 years (for Gen Z) and 24 - 40 years (for millennial). It was important that studies had an Indian sample only. Studies including a non-Indian sample would be excluded. The study did not look for any form of intervention or control. With respect to outcomes, we looked for papers that provided socio psychological insights or outcomes. Papers or resource material that provided outcomes of any sort form apart from these were to be excluded. It was also decided that papers or resource material published only in English would be considered for the purpose of the study. Those in other languages were to be excluded. It was also decided that the studies or articles that were to be a part of this paper was to be published within the period of April 2020 to December 2021. Resource material before or after this period was to be excluded.

Table 1: Extended PICO for this systematic review

Review Questions	What is the impact of COVID-19 on Indian working professionals both Millennial and Gen Z?	
	Inclusion Criteria	**Exclusion Criteria**
Population	Workers (from both the organized and unorganized sector)	Non work samples
Age	Millennial (25 – 40 years) and Gen Z (18 – 24 years)	< 20 years / >40 years
Nationality	Indian	Non-Indian Sample
Date published	Between April 2020 – December 2021	Before April 2020, after December 2021
Design	Mixed Method, Qualitative	Quantitative only
Source of studies	Full length academic peer reviewed journals, Abstracts of academic peer reviewed journals, gray literature (newspapers, blogs, e-journals, dissertations, theses) discussing the impact of COVID 19 on working professionals	Academic peer reviewed studies and gray literature discussing only theories and concepts associated with COVID 19
Nature of impact discussed	Organizational, socio - psychological impacts	Medical, financial, political, international
Language	English	Any other language

Process of Data Extraction

The researchers also identified some key words which would support in filtering relevant studies. These keywords included 'Psychological impact of COVID 19', 'working Indian millennial', and psycho-sociological impact of COVID 19', 'young Indian professionals' and the like. Studies and articles were filtered accordingly. The fit between the accepted articles and studies with the inclusion and exclusion criteria was verified by both the researchers. To establish that fit, the abstract of the articles was thoroughly read to ensure that the sample and the objective of the study aligned with our requirements. For grey literature, the decided keywords were searched and acceptance happened only when the relevant keywords were found.

RESULTS

Search Results

Given the timeline that was decided for the study, a total of 53 articles could be procured through the keywords, combining both grey literature and research studies. Only 5 out of these were as per the inclusion criteria and hence accepted. All of these came under the category of grey literature. The rest of the studies were rejected.

*Refer RESULTS chart in page number 609

Characteristics of the included studies

Published Year
All studies were published between April 2020 and December 2021.

Location of the studies
All the studies were in India.

Sample Demographics
The sample used for discussion in each of these articles was described as Gen Z and Millennial. It consisted of both males and females. They were working as professionals across various organisational set ups. The first article(reference?) focuses on Gen Z who completed their college and was new entrants in the professional work space. The second article(reference?) brought to the fore-front, stories of some millennial. They respectively worked in Kantar, a hotel industry in Delhi and a start-up in Bengaluru. The third article(reference?) discussed the results of a survey that had been conducted in 2021 during the months of October and November. It was conducted across 203 cities and over 10,000 responses were gathered and the shocks that the pandemic had subjected them to were discussed. The next article(reference?) was a report released by Deloitte which spoke of the effect of the pandemic on the working millennial and Gen Z professionals. The fifth article (reference?) was a consolidated report of a survey which was conducted by Maverick's India. The survey provided insights on the crises that employees belonging to various age bands were facing. Brighter light was shed on the issues faced by the millennial and Gen Z through their comparison with the Baby Boomers.

DISCUSSION

We now turn our attention to the articles that were shortlisted through the inclusion criteria. The first article by Ahuja (2020) *"Gen Z under lockdown: From virtual drinks to memes, here's how Gen Z and millennials are coping with the impact of the coronavirus crisis"* explains the idiosyncrasies in the manner through which the pandemic affected Gen Z. A larger theme of 'limitations' is highlighted through this study. The pandemic was a tougher challenge for Gen Z as the generation considered freedom to be a deficiency need. They have grown in an environment that guarantees them liberty at all cost. Work is also seen as a medium to increase one's social circle. Work lunches and drink parties are a norm. With the pandemic in effect, the possibility of these gatherings were squashed. Each activity that one could do were restricted to the boundaries of the homes or the laptop screens. At a time when such restrictions equated to frustration and monotony for others, it equated to enforced isolation and existential crisis for the Gen Z (Ahuja, 2020).

The second article by Singh (2020) was titled *"Covid 19 has turned millennials into India's worried generation."* This study puts up on the forefront, the eerie grins of uncertainty and insecurity. It narrates episodes from the lives of millennials who lost their job due to the pandemic and how the striking off the names from the payrolls equated to the slashing off confidence and respect in the larger society as one had to thrive at the mercy of the parents. The article quite elaborately states how matters become concerning for the millennials as they had secured their first jobs during the 2008 recession. The market that was slowly crawling from the shatters of the economic recession, offered this group, much less than what it had offered to the others. For someone who had to compromise on being served less from the very beginning, this jolt added salt to the wounds. Getting fired from work at this juncture posed questions upon some major decisions one had to take in life - like marriage, starting one's own business, buying one's own house and the like. The limitations brought upon one's life due to the closing of the physical world brought in a question about the time when it would all go back to normal. The seeming lack of answer to this question birthed a psychological insecurity in addition to the financial insecurities one was going through. The uncertainty surrounding the situation was deeply felt by the millennials as compared to the other generations.

The third article by Verma and Barthwal (2021) was titled "*Lockdown boosted family life, but India's young face anxiety, WFH fatigue.*" This article compares the inconveniences faced by people from different generations - namely, the pre-millennials, the millennials and the post millennials. The pre-millennials were disturbed due to the loss of family outings

and gatherings. The impossibility of vacations and restriction to home caused considerable frustration among them. The millennials and the post millennials suffered from the 'work from home' fatigue. This could be attributed to several factors like increased office workload, a lack of balance between office hours and family hours. The work from home format also hindered the usual meeting with friends and colleagues. This limit to social interaction in the workplace contributed to their heightened anxieties. However, the study also reports instances of people who benefitted from the work from home format. The section of people who experienced this benefit, experienced it primarily because they felt they had the liberty to choose between reporting to their workplace and working remotely. This liberty of choice added to their satisfaction. However, such responses were less in number. The larger theme that could be identified from this article centred around the issue of emotional and psychological fatigue, resulting from being alone, isolated and the considerable hazing of the boundaries between work life and home. There was a bellowing need for mental health awareness that emerged from this discussion.

The fourth article, which was a study on millennials by Deloitte (2021) was titled "*Call for Accountability and Action.*" It was a comprehensive report made by Deloitte on the millennials and how the pandemic affected their outlook towards the business world in general. It spoke of three striking perceptions that the millennials had come to inculcate in the face of the pandemic. They expressed deep remorse over the lack of empathy shown by their employers. They expressed in clear terms, the need for prioritising their mental health concerns which sky-rocketed during the pandemic. At the same time there was fear of the economy being unable to overcome the shock that it was subjected by Covid-19. They also feared businesses falling in the economy due to an inevitable focus on environmental concerns that were born out of the Covid crisis. However, a streak of resilience in their thought processes could be identified when they acknowledged their responsibility towards the environment as the call of the hour. They were willing to take that responsibility from the prior generations at work and were motivated in contributing towards society at a time when their hopes were the bleakest. A larger theme of resilience could be identified from this discussion.

The fifth article, published by Oracle (2021) in their report called Workplace Intelligence was titled *"Mental Health at Work Requires Attention, Nuance, and Swift Action."* Along the lines of the first three articles, this article too, spoke of the fatigue caused by the pandemic. The Gen Z was reported to have experienced the highest amounts of stress owing to their inability to delineate work and home responsibilities. The millennials faced the issue of strained relationships at home owing to conflicts between spouses and disconnection from children. The stress experienced by the Indian workers was also more owing to technological glitches. A major percentage of the workforce was very new to the concept of virtual meetings and the related software. The delay caused in the smooth functioning of the workplace roles owing to the novice adjustment with technology was a powerful stressor. Adding to this were their numerous work life responsibilities. All these factors culminated to form one large force causing considerable fatigue in their lives on a psychosocial front. It was reported that Indian millennials and Gen Z were more open to discussing mental health issues than their older counterparts. Not just that, they had started giving space to AI (Artificial Intelligence) guided mental health supports in their daily schedules to be able to deal with the changes effectively.

Thus from the discussion, we can conclude four major themes, namely limitations, uncertainty and insecurity, emotional and psychological fatigue and resilience that emerged from the articles were shortlisted using the inclusion criteria. Some of these themes are supported by subsequently published articles too.

An important observation of the researchers was that during the time selected for this systematic review many COVID-19 special editions, related to the pandemic in academic journals were published but few focussed explicitly on the group selected for this review. Tandon (2021) has stated that the Asian Journal of Psychiatry published nine articles that were cited by other researchers maximally dealing with the impact of COVID-19 and mental health however none of these focussed directly on professional Indian millennials or Gen Z samples. Only on reviewing each of these closely one of the articles was found to have half its sample on health-care professionals (Roy et al,2020). If seen in general, the themes that were identified are found to reverberate in some other studies that had a similar objective. A study by Becker (2021) explored the way in which the pandemic affected the Gen Z, especially their perceptions about work and work opportunities. The limitation imposed upon them due to the pandemic caused them considerable anxiety and stress. The home lock up subjected them to profound loneliness. It affected their interpersonal skills and pushed them into an uncertain space as employment opportunities started reducing and many who had just joined the workplace were asked to resign. They were now, with all excitement looking forward to the return of normal life where their offices would function as usual again. Another study showed that the younger people, those under 35 years of age were more likely to experience the tremor of the pandemic as compared to the older cohorts. According to the report, millennials experienced greater negative thoughts which were repetitive in nature. These manifested in form of worry and rumination. The emotional and psychological fatigue they were experiencing could be addressed to the mental load that weighed upon them. This concept is relevant in explaining the theme of emotional and psychological fatigue as it combines the cognitive effort required in maintaining the family life and emotional effort one needs to exert to make sure that the balance between work life and family life is maintained. To be cognizant of nurturing feelings that encompass both the work and family spheres adds on to the emotional and psychological fatigue experienced by millennials (Wagener, Stassart and Etienne, 2022). In another study that was conducted in China on millennial and Gen Z quarantine hotel employees, it was revealed

that there were moderate to severe symptoms of depression and anxiety. This study too ascribed to the burning need of dialogues on mental health with respect to the working millennial and Gen Z population (Teng, Wu, Lin and Xu, 2020). It could be thus seen that the mental health of millennials and Gen Z employees were a concern for organizations across the globe. It was agreed that their needs and bandwidth to combat the pandemic had a trajectory of its own and required special attention.

CONCLUSION

What can be considered as an achievement of the paper is ability to begin a conversation that focuses on the requirements of the millennial and Gen Z professionals keeping the pandemic in mind. This yet again hints at the limits imposed upon this work due to the absence of academic, scientific research on the similar topic. It is of paramount importance to note that all the articles that were finally selected based on the inclusion criteria, fell into the category of grey literature. None of the research studies searched from the databases matched with the inclusion criteria. This could lead one to the understanding that the socio-psychological impact of the pandemic on millennial employees has still not captured the research interests of researchers. The conversation around the effect of the pandemic on the workplace caters to the entire workforce with no specific consideration to the millennials and Gen Z. As it was understood in the beginning of this paper that millennials and Gen Z stand out from their older counterparts, it also implies that the pandemic would have hit them differently. The various facets through which the difference could be understood is a territory, the exploration of which could help the organizations gather insights that may prove to be effective in managing this workforce.

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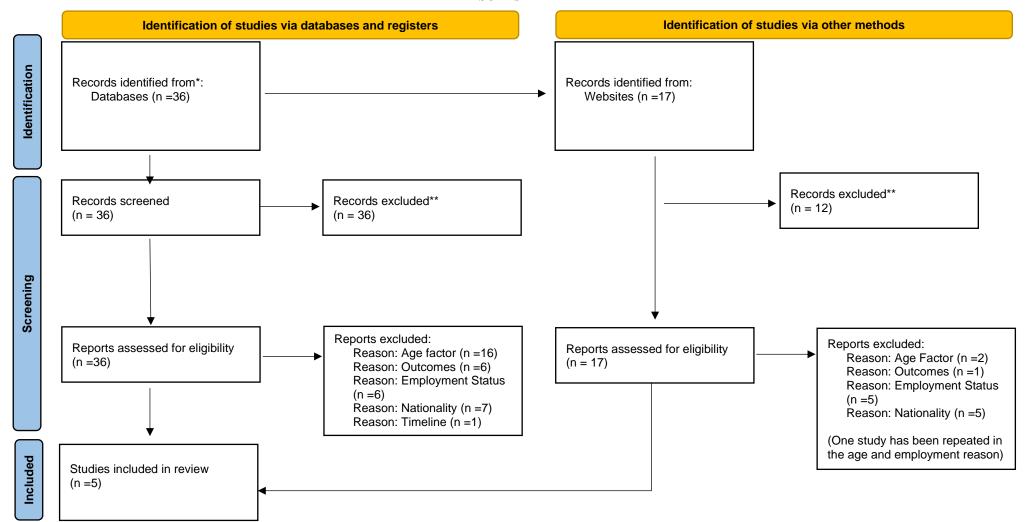
*RESULTS

Fig. 1: Process of shortlisting the studies as per PRISMA guidelines (Page et al, 2021)