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## How the COVID-19 pandemic affected mother-daughter relationships

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### ABSTRACT

*The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has had drastic consequences on all aspects of our lives, especially relationships. Since research suggests that the mother-daughter dyad has significantly higher influence on adolescents than any other familial relation, the purpose of this qualitative study was to assess the impact of the pandemic on this markedly influential relationship in the Indian context. Convenient sampling was used to recruit 20 female participants, all in the 14 to 17 years age group, studying in Neerja Modi School, Jaipur. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed, thematically analysed, and the results were then tabulated. It was found that the pandemic positively impacted mother-daughter relationships for the majority of the participants, while for a select few, it led to detrimental effects like increase in the number of fights and arguments. The study also aimed to evaluate the impact of these changes in relationships on the well-being of the daughter, and it was inferred from the data that for a majority of the participants, the shift in relationship dynamics was accompanied by a conspicuously positive impact on their wellness and mental health.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, pandemic, mother-daughter relationships, lockdown, well-being

### How the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Mother-Daughter Relationships

As social beings, maintaining healthy relationships with people around us is of great importance in our lives. Relationships play a pivotal role in the well-being of an individual. They have a great impact on our health, affecting our mental, psychosocial, and physiological states (Umberson & Montez, 2010). Social connections and relations help individuals keep their emotional health in check, deal with stress, and remain strong under stressful situations. Social isolation and loneliness, on the other hand, can increase feelings of vulnerability, and negatively affect mental and immune health (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Family relations in particular are very important - members are interlinked with each other at every stage of life, and thus relationships within a family affect and influence individuals throughout their lives (Thomas et al., 2017).

The degree to which social and familial relationships fulfil the need for connections is even more critical during adolescence when individuals are at a very vulnerable and susceptible stage of life (Maurizi et al., 2013).

Family members (typically parents) form the foundation from which adolescents' relationships are majorly influenced. As Chen E and team state in their paper on family relationships in childhood, "*Emotionally significant, comforting relationships during childhood are linked to better physiological and health profiles in infancy, childhood, and adulthood*" (Chen et al., 2017). Throughout childhood, adolescence, and even into the college years, parents—primarily mothers—remain the most commonly identified primary attachment figure for individuals. Parents have a crucial place in adolescent life. They act as a source of comfort during stressful times, which can ultimately help adolescents deal with such future events in a more calm and relaxed manner, thus helping reduce physiological responses to acute stressors. Parents also serve as a source of external monitoring, which is a crucial determinant of adolescent behaviors including substance abuse, social problems, etc. Parental relationships thus have a major role in determining the overall well-being of an adolescent (Chen et al., 2017).

Within a family, in the bringing up of children, mothers play a more important and influential role than fathers. Mothers act as the primary caregivers (Onayli & Erdur-Baker, 2013). And though all familial relationships have an influence on the well-being of an adolescent, studies show that the interdependence, emotional connection, and influence are higher in mother-daughter relationships than in any other tandems (Peterson & Roberts, 2003). Therefore, the attributes of the mother-daughter relationship have a key role in determining the social, psychological, and physiological well-being of adolescent daughters.

The importance of mother-daughter relationships grew even more during the COVID 19 pandemic as they were one of the very few relations that teenagers were able to maintain fully in the lockdowns (Rogers et al., 2020). The Pandemic, which came to India in early 2020, has had drastic effects on us in almost all domains of our lives. Our social relationships are a major one of those domains. To control the spread of this disease, lockdowns were imposed in India and many other countries. Except in case of emergencies, citizens were not allowed to leave their homes and had to stay off the streets (Business Standard, 2020). Social isolation was thus a major consequence of the pandemic. Long periods of isolation in lockdowns or in quarantine have detrimental effects on mental well-being, and as has been discussed above, they can increase our feelings of vulnerability, and also harm our immune health.

### **Rationale**

In the course of the pandemic, while friends and peers have been further apart from each other, family members have been made to live together for a prolonged period (Naser et al., 2020). Thus, families have been a major source of support and comfort for many in these uncertain times.

This has the potential to be even more true for mother-daughter relationships since, as discussed above, interdependence and emotional connection are higher in these relations than in any other duos. The nature of these relationships carries a decisive role in the well-being of daughters.

Looking at the literature present on mother-daughter relationships and how they affect daughters' development and well-being, it was observed that the ones in context to the pandemic are few, and the ones taking in view the Indian context are almost none. Thus, the present study aims to study the effect of the pandemic on mother-daughter relationships and how that affected daughters, in the Indian context.

### **Case Study Method**

Qualitative case study is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. This ensures that the issue is explored not through one, but a variety of lenses, allowing for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood.

According to Yin (2003), a case study design should be considered when: (a) the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study; (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context.

Unique in comparison to other qualitative approaches, within case study research, investigators can collect and integrate quantitative survey data, which facilitates reaching a holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In case study, data from these multiple sources are then converged in the analysis process rather than handled individually.

While case studies help provide in-depth information about the participants, generalization on the basis of limited subjective data becomes a challenge. Multiple strategies should thus be put into use for data collection from a number of different sources. In order to overcome any personal bias on the part of the researcher, multiple investigators should also be employed. Further, the researcher should also maintain proper sources for linking the data findings on the research questions (NCERT, 2013).

### **Methodology**

#### **Aim**

The aim of the present study is to examine and understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mother-daughter relationships and how that affected daughters, in the Indian context. The focus of the study is on girls in the 14 to 17 years age group.

#### **Objectives**

1. To understand if the mother-daughter relationships of teenage girls in the 14-17 years age group were affected by the pandemic, in the Indian context.
2. To discern the specific factors that facilitated the change, if any.
3. To determine the effect the change in relationships had on the daughters.

#### **Participants**

Convenience sampling was administered for selecting the twenty participants of the present study. The participants were all females in the 14 to 17-years age group, studying in Neerja Modi School, Jaipur. All belonged to the upper-middle class of society, with access to resources like internet services and electronic devices.

#### **Tools Used**

The tool used for the data collection of the present study was:

**Semi-structured interview schedule.** Semi-structured process of interview was used to gather information from the participants around the research objectives. Semi-structured interviewing is an overarching term used for describing a range of different forms of interviewing most commonly associated with qualitative research (Galletta, 2013). The defining characteristic of semi-structured interviews is that they have a flexible and fluid structure, unlike structured interviews, which contain a rigid sequence of questions to be asked in the same manner to all interviewees. The structure of a semi-structured interview is usually organized

around an aide memoire or interview guide. This contains major themes to be covered during the course of each interview, rather than a sequenced script of standardized questions (Drever, 1995). The aim is to allow for flexibility in how and in what sequence questions are asked, and in whether and how particular areas might be followed up on and developed differently with individual interviewees. This is so that the interview can be shaped by the interviewee's own understandings as well as the researcher's interests.

Semi-structured interviews are most often used in qualitative studies. The style is most useful when one is investigating a topic that is very personal to participants, like the one in the present study. Benefits of using this method include the ability to build a rapport and gain participants' trust, while also procuring a deeper understanding of the responses (Flyan, 2005). Moreover, they are conducted with a fairly open framework, allowing for focused, and expressive two-way communication.

Considering all the above points, it was decided that the use of semi-structured interviews would be most suitable for the present study. A comfortable environment and good rapport with the participants were required in order to get the most candid and significant information – something that could best be done using semi-structured interviews only. Moreover, additional information needed to be obtained at various points in interviews, and the use of semi-structured interviewing made it possible to flexibly ask follow-up questions, enabling the collection of credible and complete data. In this style, majority of questions are created during the interview, allowing both the interviewer and the interviewee the flexibility to probe for more details, or clarify issues.

**Procedure**

For the purpose of data collection, first a probe list, enlisting all major themes to be covered, was prepared to facilitate the conduction of semi-structured interviews. Convenience sampling was followed for selecting the twenty participants for the study. Participants were approached via online chat forums, and after providing all the preliminary details, they were individually asked if they would be willing to participate in the research. The interviewees were all females in the 14 to 17 years age group, studying in Neerja Modi School, Jaipur. After receiving their informed consents, one-on-one interviews were conducted over the video-conferencing app, Zoom, for data collection. With the participants' permissions, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The data so obtained was thereafter thematically analysed and tabulated, and results were accordingly inferred and discussed.

**Results**

Themes	Explanation	Verbatim
Nature of relationship	Owing to the pandemic and the consequential lockdowns, there were significant changes in the nature of mother-daughter relationships. Constrained in the walls of their houses, with the company of no one but their family, participants' bonds with their mothers were affected in certain prominent ways.	<p><i>P1: Since I was always at home, and I used to create a lot of mess, she used to get mad over it. So yeah, that caused a little problem, because even she's not used to everyone being in the home all the time, and she had to take care of everything. Also, I didn't usually get my personal space, and she used to get more irritable because everything was such a mess, so yeah, I think that worsened our relationship a little bit.</i></p> <p><i>P2: It has definitely been affected, but in a good way. We never used to get that time to just talk and share our thoughts...But now, we're able to have good long talks, so that has changed a lot. Also, I think I've become more understanding and I know her more because of the time we're getting to spend together.</i></p> <p><i>P5: Yeah, I think we understand each other much better now; we always did, but it has become better.</i></p> <p><i>P9: Our communication has increased more over time because of the pandemic. But also, since I've become lazier now, and am not able to get much work done, our fights and arguments have also gone up.</i></p> <p><i>P12: She's definitely got a lot more workload now, so she gets angry very easily, like on very small things. She scolds me a lot more than before. We didn't have the time to interact that much before, so there weren't as many chances for scolding. So yeah, the arguments and fights have increased.</i></p> <p><i>P14: I think I got to spend more time with her, I got to really observe and to know her a lot better. Emotionally I think I got to know more about her, the things that make her feel a certain way, and stuff like that, so yeah, I think that has changed too.</i></p> <p><i>P17: Before, I used to just see her as my mom, who's always there for me and understands me. Now I also see her as a person, and I see what she goes through, because I now have more time to observe her, and like, see her as a person, her moods, how they change, and just those small things that indicate what she's going through. So yeah, I've got to understand her a lot more.</i></p>

		<p><i>P19: Yeah, it grew deeper I think, and we were able to connect more, so it was a positive impact.</i></p> <p><i>P20: Yes, it turned out to be much better. She understands me way better now, because I think now, I'm very comfortable sharing things with her, how I'm feeling and everything, so yeah, it's improved.</i></p>
Avenues of Interaction	<p>Since they had much more time in their hands, participants were able to engage in various activities and explore different avenues of interaction with their mothers. The extent of engagement in leisure activities they did together underwent a change.</p>	<p><i>P1: There was a phase in the lockdown when we used to work out together, and sometimes we used to walk together on the terrace. We also used to cook new dishes sometimes.</i></p> <p><i>P2: Before the pandemic, we didn't really have that much time. Because school, tuition, academy, then self-study, so I don't think we used to talk much. But now it's like we're always together. We're able to talk a lot more. We also play badminton together in the evenings, and we used to play ludo and cards as well.</i></p> <p><i>P3: Before, I think we just spent 2-3 hours daily on average. Didn't really get that much quality time together. But during the pandemic, it was almost the entire day that we were together. Before, we didn't get the time to do any activities, but during the pandemic, we did everything, from playing games to watching movies to dancing together, to cleaning the house, cooking, so yeah, everything.</i></p> <p><i>P7: We were able to spend more time together during the pandemic. And we also started cooking together.</i></p> <p><i>P10: The time spent together increased a lot - from around 4 hours to the entire day. Because either I'm always in her room, watching TV, or just wandering around her. And before, she used to always just ask me to go and study, but now we also cook together and she's teaching me a few things.</i></p> <p><i>P13: She's a working woman, so her entire schedule was always very busy. Sometimes we used to have dinner together by chance, but otherwise, neither of us really got that much time. But then during the pandemic, when she was home, we used to spend almost the entire day together only. Both of us love to spend time in nature, so we started to just sit beside our home garden, and then we used to talk, and just enjoy the rains during the rainy season. And yeah, we danced a lot as well.</i></p> <p><i>P14: Before, it was just having lunch together and then you know, stuff you NEED to do every day that got us together. But now it's more about stuff you WANT to do with the other person like I want to play a game with you, or watch something with you, or maybe experiment on cooking something together, drawing together, etc. So, we were really able to spend more quality time together.</i></p> <p><i>P15: I'm almost constantly with her now - a huge change from before the pandemic. In the initial few weeks, we used to play board games and charades and other games. She also taught me how to cook.</i></p> <p><i>P16: We spent hardly an hour or so together pre-covid, but now, except for when I have online classes, I'm always with her. We would cook together at times, and we would go for long drives. I learnt how to drive during the pandemic, so yeah, we used to do that together.</i></p>
Effect on mental health	<p>The nature of relationships we evince with people around us plays a significant role in shaping our mental states and impacting our well-being. Thus, due to changes in the relationship dynamics with their mothers, the</p>	<p><i>P2: Because I used to open up with her so much, so you know, that fear and that hesitation that people will judge you, that sort of went away. I think I have become very open, like previously, I never would have been able to go up to someone and talk to them, you know, won't be able to initiate the conversation. But now, I can. If someone is not talking, I can take the first step and talk to them. Also, my mental well-being has improved a lot.</i></p> <p><i>P3: It's definitely kept me sane to be very honest, because I would have gone crazy without her, so being able to talk to her has actually kept me sane. Like, every time I started overthinking, I'd go and talk to her, and she would always give me some amazing advice and I'd be happy again.</i></p>

	<p>participants themselves were also affected in considerable ways.</p>	<p><i>P5: I think our friendship and bond in the family grew more, so yeah, it had a positive impact on me as well.</i></p> <p><i>P7: I think since I got to know her better, that automatically creates this sense of happiness and closeness, so yeah, in that sense my happiness levels did increase.</i></p> <p><i>P8: Before, I was concerned only about my own thing, my own world. But I feel I've become more empathetic now, since I'm able to look at my mother as a different person now, I'm also able to feel more for the people around me.</i></p> <p><i>P9: Maybe because of the fighting and all, I used to get a little bottled-up, because I couldn't really say everything that comes to mind obviously</i></p> <p><i>P10: I was really anxious in between, I had social anxiety, I hated going out, but it's better now, I can face people.</i></p>
<p>Mother as confidant</p>	<p>Mothers and children share a unique bond. Within a family, mothers play a more influential role than fathers. They act as the primary caregivers. For many participants, their mothers were the member of the family they were closest to, and the person they shared everything with. They acted as confidants for the participants.</p>	<p><i>P3: I am closest to my mother. I share everything with her. We discuss everything related to Bollywood, my friends' relationships, what happens in class, if I make a fuss or anything, so seriously everything. Or she would be talking about her things, so we're just like friends. We share everything, giving each other time-to-time updates.</i></p> <p><i>P6: Closest to my mom definitely. I can talk to her, share anything and everything with her, and she actually knows everything about me, from relationships to the school drama to everything.</i></p> <p><i>P7: I'm very comfortable sharing anything with her, and it's actually a habit - since I was very little, it's always been like this.</i></p> <p><i>P8: Yeah, I'm closest to my mother. I talk to her about everything, and can share every detail of my life with her.</i></p> <p><i>P9: She's very open, and there aren't any rules or something that must be followed. And then, she also gives me my own space and freedom, and is not like not like those over-protective parents who don't allow their children to do anything. So, I'm able to talk to her about everything as well.</i></p> <p><i>P14: It's always been very open, and there are no filters with her. And, of course I depend on her a lot, and we have a very fun and open relationship. We crack jokes all the time, we laugh together a lot, we're like best friends. I share everything with her and she also shares everything with me.</i></p> <p><i>P15: I think she's the one person who knows me best, and with whom I'm able to talk about anything.</i></p> <p><i>P19: Closest to mom obviously. I share whatever happens in a day, like, mostly everything with her.</i></p>
<p>Major source of support</p>	<p>Being able to share everything with their mothers also makes them a major source of support for the participants. They are able to rely on them for advice and help, and ask them for support any time they need it.</p>	<p><i>P1: Yeah, she has always supported me in all decisions I make and has helped me with any problems I might be going through.</i></p> <p><i>P4: She's very kind towards everyone and always helps others. If I have any issues, I go to her and she always supports me through it and guides me.</i></p> <p><i>P10: She always supports me in everything, whatever I do, she's always there for me, and then, whenever I feel low, she'll talk to me, comfort me, I'm really lucky to have her. And plus, I love her advice. The advice she gives me in any situation is always mind-blowing.</i></p> <p><i>P11: I can tell her anything, and she'll give me wise advice about it. She guides me through everything.</i></p> <p><i>P13: I rely on her for emotional support, and support in any tough situation. Both small, as well as serious things, like anything small related to school, or anything huge related to my life choices and career choices, for all of them I just go to her.</i></p>

		<p><i>P17: She's very supportive of everything I want to do, and she pushes me to do my best. And for any advice related to my career, I go to her because she has a lot of knowledge, I'm able to learn a lot from her.</i></p> <p><i>P18: In almost every dimension of my life, I would go to her for advice. Friend fights, boy issues, anything. She's very mature and knows how to handle tough situations, she helps me with every problem.</i></p> <p><i>P19: If I have to run to someone with a problem, that would be my mom. Everything. Career choices, relationship choices, seriously anything at all, I would go to her, because she's such an all-rounder person. And she always gives accurate feedback and advice, and always supports me.</i></p> <p><i>P20: She's the best advisor, she always tells me about what all could happen in the future, preparing me for whatever problems might come. And she helps me make the right choices and supports me through everything.</i></p>
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## Discussion

The objective of the study was to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequential lockdowns on mother-daughter relationships of teenage daughters, and how that in turn had an impact on the daughters' well-being. Convenience sampling was followed to select the participants. The course of the study included conduction of semi-structured interviews with participants, transcription and thematic analysis of the interviews, and tabulation of results.

The participants were twenty 14 to 17-year-old females from Neerja Modi School, Jaipur.

The first theme derived from the twenty interviews was "nature of relationship". The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes in the social lives of people. Relationships of all sorts have been affected due to the ensuing lockdowns (Naser et al., 2020). Not very surprisingly then, the nature of mother-daughter relationships of the participants were also impacted. As they got to spend more time with each other, their understanding levels towards each other evolved. "I think I've become more understanding and I know her more because of the time we're getting to spend together", said participant P2. How they look at each other also changed because of this unprecedented situation. "Before, I used to just see her as my mom, who's always there for me and understands me. Now I also see her as a person, and I see what she goes through, because I now have more time to observe her, and see her as a person - her moods, how they change, and just those small things that indicate what she's going through," explained participant P17. While for most, getting more time led to a betterment in understanding levels, for a few, the same factor resulted in an increase in the number of arguments and negative confrontations. Not very used to staying around the same people all day long for an essentially unknown amount of time, some participants faced certain challenges and conflicts in their relationships as well. "Since I was always at home, and I used to create a lot of mess, she used to get mad over it. That caused a little problem, because even she's not used to everyone being in the home all the time, and she had to take care of everything. Also, I didn't usually get my personal space, and she used to get more irritable," expressed participant P1. Moreover, all the negativity and passivity that the lockdowns brought with them resulted in an increase in the listlessness and unproductivity of participants (Khattar, Jain, & Quadri, 2020), which served as an additional ground for arguments between mothers and daughters. "Since I've become lazier now, and am not able to get much work done, our fights and arguments have also gone up," stated participant P9. Overall, the lockdown and the subsequent increase in time spent had notable influences on the nature of mother-daughter relationships of the participants.

The second theme that was prominent in the interviews was change is the "avenues of interaction". Before the pandemic, for most participants, school work dominated a large part of their day, but with the lockdown, that changed. Participants' average daily time spent with their mothers increased, causing various changes in the kinds of activities they did together (Campbell, 2020). Lockdowns provided many with an opportunity to explore new things with their mothers, or simply redoing some old forgotten activities together. Participant P3 described, "Before, I think we just spent 2-3 hours daily on average. Didn't really get that much quality time together. But during the pandemic, it was almost the entire day that we were together. Before, we didn't get the time to do any activities, but during the pandemic, we did everything, from playing games to watching movies to dancing together, to cleaning the house, cooking, so yeah, everything." This was even more true in cases where the mother was a working woman. "Her entire schedule was always very busy. Sometimes we used to have dinner together by chance, but otherwise, neither of us really got that much time. But then during the pandemic, when she was home, we got to spend almost the entire day together only," recalled participant P13 whose mother is a journalist. Cooking and playing board games were the most predominant avenues of interaction explored by almost all of the participants.

The third significant theme was "effect on mental health." Social relationship scientists often emphasise that social relationships have a great impact on an individual, affecting their behavioural, psychosocial, and physiological states (Umberson & Montez, 2010). Over the course of the lockdown, changes in the nature of relationships with their mothers also caused certain alterations in the participants' mental and emotional states. On being asked how the change in their relationship dynamics affected her personally, participant P2 responded, "Because I used to open up with her so much, that fear and that hesitation that people will judge you, that sort of went away. I think I have become very open. Also, my mental well-being has improved a lot." Rise in understanding levels also played a role in bringing about particular developments in the participants. "Before, I was concerned

only about my own thing, my own world. But I feel I've become more empathetic now, since I'm able to look at my mother as a different person now, I'm also able to feel more for the people around me," revealed participant P8. The transformations in the mother-daughter relationship dynamics thus had meaningful effects on the daughters personally as well (Douglass, 2005).

The fourth dominant theme was "mother as confidant." Studies show that in raising children, the mother, acting as the primary caregiver, has a more pivotal role than the father (Onayli & Erdur-Baker, 2013). Secure adolescents predominantly identify mothers as their primary attachment figure (Freeman & Brown, 2001). In the interviews, it was found that for a majority of the participants, their mothers acted as a confidant, someone they could talk to about everything candidly. "I'm closest to my mother. I talk to her about everything, and can share every detail of my life with her," said participant P8. Mothers were also most commonly cited as the closest family member for many participants. They shared a closer and more unique bond with her as compared to other members of the family. "I am closest to my mother. I share everything with her... We share everything, giving each other time-to-time updates," described participant P2. Mothers thus acted as a major source of trust and confidentiality for most of the participants.

The fifth theme worth noting in the interviews was "major source of support". Since they act as confidants, mothers also become a major source of support and comfort for adolescents (Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2012). A large number of participants relied on their mothers for advice and support, asking them for help any time they needed it. "If I have to run to someone with a problem, that would be my mom... And she always gives accurate feedback and advice, and always supports me," shared participant P19. Not just advice, mothers were the go-to person for emotional needs as well. "I rely on her for emotional support, and support in any tough situation. Both small, as well as serious things...for all of them I just go to her," responded participant P13. Mothers were thus highly significant sources of support, advice, and comfort for the participants.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mother-daughter relationships in the Indian context, and how that in turn impacted the well-being of daughters. Convenience sampling was used for selecting the 20 participants, who were all females in the 14 to 17 years age group, studying in Neerja Modi School, Jaipur. After receiving their informed consents, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, and certain prominent themes were derived from the transcriptions. The predominant themes obtained were: nature of relationship, avenues of interaction, effect on mental health, major source of support, and mother as confidant. It was found that there were significant changes in the participants' relationship dynamics with their mothers. While there was a positive impact for a majority of the interviewees, for a select few, there was an increase in fights and arguments. The extent of engagement of participants with their mothers also increased over the course of the pandemic for most of the participants. Changes in their nature of relations with mothers had evident consequences on the participants personally as well. The closest member of the family for most participants was their mother – they shared everything with her, and also viewed her as a major source of support.

## Limitations and further recommendations

Due to lack of required resources, participants were selected using convenience sampling, and the participant size was limited. The generalisability of the study is thus low. To overcome this limitation, the participants could be significantly increased, and randomly selected in future related research. Moreover, the qualitative data so obtained from the semi-structured interviews was taken at face value, without much augmented probing. Lastly, case study as a method leaves scope for subjective bias. Future research can thus be conducted on a larger scale with multiple researchers across cities for increased generalizability and limiting subjective bias.

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