The Role of Language in the Survival of Bangladeshi Theatre Artists during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Perspective on Resurging Society's Hope and Changing Realities

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the theatre industry and its performers, causing psychological and socio-economic distress. This study examines the survival challenges faced by theatre artists in Meherpur, Bangladesh, during the pandemic and explores the role of language in their efforts to inspire hope and rejuvenate society. The paper investigates how these artists utilized online platforms and employed their native language, Bengali (L1), along with English, to communicate with the local population. By analyzing qualitative interviews with fifteen artists and administering a quantitative questionnaire to fifty-five participants, this study reveals the artists' resilience in overcoming psychological trauma and economic distress. It illustrates how their use of language, including English, facilitated their connection with the community, providing a source of support and encouragement during the lockdown period.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, theatre artists, psychological trauma, economic distress, online platforms, language dynamics, hope

1. Introduction

The emergence of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in early 2020 led the world to implement partial or complete closures of all social mobility as the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it as global pandemic (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Hence, it restricted people to the home as a part of a comprehensive health emergency (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). Consequently, the pandemic adversely affected all aspects of everyday life, including the economy, sports, transport, education, art, culture, and theatre industries. Likely, the physical theatre organizations then provisionally drew down their stage curtains and placed their artists on furlough (Huddleson, 2023, p. 68). The global impact of COVID-19 and its subsequent repression actions on theatres thus appeared alarming. The acute vulnerability of this sector during that time created prospective repercussions for those who entirely relied on creative and cultural industries (Guibert & Tyte, 2021). In the European Union, the arts and recreation sector ranked as the second most severely affected industry because of Covid-19 restrictions, considering factors such as employment levels and working hours. During the initial twelve weeks of lockdown in the UK, over 15,000 theatrical performances were cancelled (Chatzichristodoulou et al., 2022, p. 2). Equally, in 2020, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, the UK, and the USA experienced an astute closure of live performances, resulting in a decline of 56.12% in their activities. It reduced their revenues to 51.32% compared to previous years (Rurale et al., 2020, pp. 4-9). The COVID-19 health crisis also compelled the majority of Indian individuals, including performance artists, to predominantly remain indoors. It intensified the extensive harm to the social and economic fabric of the nation (Mehrotra et al., 2020, p. 1).

Likewise, the Bangladeshi theatre artists and industries had to face insuperable challenges to exist and carry out their creative tasks. During the second phase of COVID-19 in Bangladesh, a majority of the population received authorization to return to their workplaces and businesses following the newly established health and safety protocols. This measure was done to sustain the economy at a slower pace and to prevent the onset of famine and widespread despair. However, there remained two distinct groups of individuals who were still unable to resume their regular employment. These groups consisted of professional theatre artists and musicians, as their livelihoods were centered on organizing large gatherings and performing for them (Ratul, 2020).

Henceforth, the sudden shut down of the daily activities and the existential crises made the performing artists feel detached, dejected, isolated, frustrated, distant, and alone as uncertainty revolved around the world (Davis, 2020). Though the whole thespian industry encountered persistent socio-economic existential threats and insurmountable interruptions during the pandemic, they tried their utmost to make people inertially motivated and soar up their hopes and aspirations. They mostly did so by using different online platforms and employing both Standard English and local languages depending on the context.

Brilli et al. (2023) stressed that endeavours were made to employ digital technologies and devices to maintain the existence of theatre and foster its connections with audiences. Houlihan and Morris (2022) advocated that the students, academicians, performance artists, and

even the audiences encountered a substantial alteration to participate in communal and shared 'live' performances during the pandemic. So, the concept and encounter with 'liveness' got continuous re-evaluation and adjustment during the pandemic, especially to accommodate performances that were either digitally imbued or entirely realized through electronic mediums (p. 158). In one of the interview sessions with the founder and CEO of Open Space Theatre (OST) in Bangladesh, Tisha Mahjabeen Chowdhury expressed that:

> During the pandemic, in order to maintain a connection with our audience, we've established a Facebook group called 'A Million For Theatre.' Within this group, we regularly shared content that aimed to ignite people's interest in theatre and encourage their active participation. This Facebook group served as a platform through which we continually updated our followers about our upcoming events and initiatives (Ratul, 2020).

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Open Space Theatre's and
'There were None'
by
Nazmul Shakil Hosain,
Bangladesh
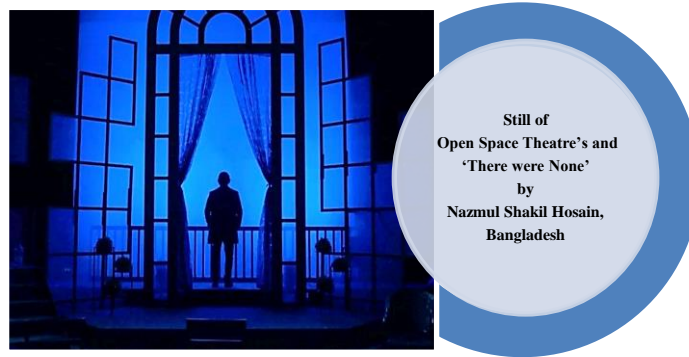
Again, regarding the role of languages in theatre, Love (2021) brilliantly espoused the idea from an interview session with the renowned theatre director of the UK, Matthew Bosley.

> In the realm of theatre, language holds immense significance. It serves as the fundamental channel for conveying messages to the audience. The rehearsal phase in theatre primarily revolves around various phases where language is used to articulate theatrical texts. Although language plays a pivotal role in nearly all forms of theatre, it is not the sole method of on-stage communication. There also exist theatrical performances where communication is achieved through physical movement. It essentially supports constituting a form of universally comprehensible expression. Nonetheless, theatre, as a whole, primarily functions as a platform for linguistic expression (Love, 2021).

Scholars, dramatists, and artists worldwide have been concerned about the use and form of the languages used in theatre industries. Generally, language is selected meticulously in the theatre and performance sectors, keeping in mind people's mundanity of life, nationalistic essence, and cultural identities. The role of language employed in a theatre production is thus to bridge the artistic and chauvinistic self and spirit of a nation. Playwrights like Harold Pinter and Alan Bennett often crafted their characters to converse, mirroring real-life situations and dialogues. They adopted this approach to portray the ordinary people, their crises, joy, sufferings, and their way of expressing themselves. The authors accordingly conveyed their thoughts and ideas by observing how the characters used language in their everyday lives. Conversely, theatre, a highly creative domain, often incorporates altered forms of language. It may not sound natural sometimes, but it aligns with the production's stylistic essence. So is the case with Shakespeare. People perceive that Shakespeare faithfully represents the language of the 16th and 17th centuries in his work. The reality is the opposite. Intriguingly, his language usage is distinctly stylized and poetic and far removed from authentic speech of the era.

So, the language used in theatre varies depending on the nature of the work, the playwright's perception, and the purpose of the piece. Besides, earlier, the audience prioritized the language employed by the actors as they focused on 'hearing' perspectives. Over time, this perception has been changed with 'seeing'. It reflects a cultural shift where visual elements in theatre are now deemed more significant than in the past. Thus, questions are posed regarding the selection, influence, and form of the languages used in a theatre. In the UK, using other local languages along with English in theatre production houses with 'surtitles' has been widespread. It has augmented the 'accessibility' of other languages where people can translate in or to what they understand. It further proves beneficial for language learners when translations between regional language and Standard English are provided to understand the theatre work.

The pandemic brought about significant shifts in how people perceive content and language in a theatre. It opened doors for individuals' curiosity about regional and diverse linguistic content. The surge in regional language content during the pandemic can be primarily attributed to the lifestyle alterations prompted by Covid-19. Safety concerns necessitated people to remain indoors. This newfound opportunity allowed them to enjoy a multitude of online shows spanning numerous genres, dialects, and other categories through smartphones and the internet (Das, 2022).

Thus, the pandemic, in a certain aspect, opened up avenues for entities and learners to be connected with regional languages alongside English. The national language of Bangladesh is Bangla, and 98% of the population is of Bengali ancestry. Its nationalist discourse strongly focuses on the nation's primarily monolingual identity. Besides, in the non-native country of Bangladesh, English is widely used as the second most commonly spoken language after Bengali as the international link language for social and economic advancement in the global world (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014, pp. 5-7). However, the theatre artists examined in this research primarily employed Bengali

(L1) as their communication channel.

> Rahman et al. (2019) observed that the utilization of indigenous languages or local vernaculars promotes unity during challenging periods. This phenomenon was apparent in Bangladesh during both the language movement in 1952 and the liberation war in 1971. Bangla has managed to withstand serious danger to its survival and has solidified its role in the formation of the country's identity throughout both the pre-and post-independence. The 1952 language movement ushered in strong nationalism and gave Bangalees (then East Pakistanis) a new sense of identity. During the 1971 independence struggle, the nation was kept together by its uniqueness and feeling of nationalism. As a result, Bangla remained the emblem of unity and national identity (pp. 2-4).

Confronting and enduring the pandemic was itself an immense challenge for people from every nook and corner of the world. The performance artists in Meherpur used online platforms and the extensive use of Bengali (L1 vernacular), to some extent English, to combat the pandemic, escape its grim reality, dissolve psycho-social and economic distress, and unite the people of that region. Thus, the implication of the Beglali language served as a symbol of pliability, togetherness, solidarity, and proactive engagement during the pandemic holocaust.

Moreover, it is widely perceived that art and culture act as a mirror and balm to inspire and enliven the wounded, worried, and agonized souls during the challenging periods of the pandemic (Islam, 2020). Sharma (2015) emphasized that art and culture, particularly through theatre, serve as catalysts for restructuring, peace building, addressing issues, and creating interconnected networks among individuals to provide cognitive support and foster resilience and a green economy. They have the ability to breathe life into emerging concerns by expressing artistic interpretations within the realm of theatre, also known as 'symbolic enactments' (pp. 27-28). The Bangladeshi theatre artists and industries worked as spokesmen to nourish and enrich people's imaginations and rejuvenate them socially and psychologically during the trying times of COVID-19. The performing artists had to scramble quintessentially to look for alternative platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and other forms of social media and the collaboration of language to enact their activities and help people overcome anxiety and depression. Above and beyond, they used common postmodern approaches like rooftops, staircases, open ground, kitchens, bathrooms, utensils, etc. to carry out their productive tasks and build trust, rapport, and a sense of ensemble among themselves and the mass population to come out of the trauma. Therefore, the need for these online modes and the use of L1 to deconstruct or reify the existing situation becomes exigent to Bangladeshi performing artists.

This paper presents an overview of the impact of the pandemic on those Bangladeshi agonized and affected artists in terms of its severity and uncertainty. Subsequently, it attempts to demonstrate the survival of the select Bangladeshi thespians during the pandemic. It further specifies the socio-economic and psychological distress the whole cultural and performing industries faced that made their life sink into oblivion and anxiety. Notwithstanding, it also explores the artists' attempts to seek some adaptations and resources, like the use of Bengali literature to make ordinary people hopeful and survive out of despair and frustration.

2. Related Literature and Conceptual Theory

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound implications for artists and performers worldwide, including those in Bangladesh. This literature review aims to provide an overview of relevant studies and research conducted on the challenges faced by performers in Bangladesh during this unprecedented crisis. The pandemic led to the abrupt cancellation of live performances and cultural events, significantly affecting the livelihoods of performers (Smith et al., 2020). Many artists, including musicians, dancers, and actors, lost their primary sources of income due to lockdowns and restrictions. Studies have highlighted the mental health challenges faced by performers during the pandemic. Isolation, uncertainty, and the inability to express them artistically took a toll on their well-being (Jones & Saksvig, 2020). This aspect has not been explored extensively in the context of Bangladesh but warrants investigation.

Cultural and creative sectors are closely related to a nation's civic, social, and economic well-being and vitality (Guibert & Hyde, 2021). They spur innovation for the economic sustainability of a country and contribute positively to society's welfare, mental health, and education (Travkina & Sacco, 2020). Further, art and entertainment conglomerates shape human perception, outlook, thinking process, and imagination. Therefore, they have an indubitable and profound impact on ordinary people and society.

Unfortunately, the whole world in 2020 experienced a crucial and extensive upheaval because of the COVID-19 pandemic and its cataclysmic crisis. No sector has been hit harder by the global pandemic's immediate and catastrophic effect than the most fragile part of the value chain- the performing art sector. The irremediable changes and distorted realities forced the art and entertainment industries to quarantine themselves at home (Johnson, 2021). Besides, because of the pandemic's drastic snow-ball effects, all sorts of worldwide events, like the incredible number of shows, performances, dramas, co-productions, tours, festivals, and conferences, have been postponed without prior notice (Polivtseva, 2020).

These radical and severe changes rendered many of the artists and performers jobless. As a result, they resort to other professions like teaching, selling products, working as caterers, etc., to exist and survive during that hard reality. Besides, some of them started working online as a solution to reshape, reschedule, and recuperate their socio-economic and psychological stress. Though these were their temporary attempts to face that hard-knock reality, it ultimately made them separated and isolated economically, socially, and psychologically. Thus, the unending confinement distorted the artist's mental health, creating frustration, anxiety, and affective and post-traumatic disorders (Zagalaz et al., 2020).

Notwithstanding, the pandemic caused financial insecurity, psychological stresses, nervous breakdowns, sleep disorders, and lastly,

instability in life that made people face an existential threat. Forte et al. (2020) and Roy et al. (2020) justified this, saying that the survival crisis led to around 80% of people feeling broken, causing economic, physical, emotional, intellectual, and social stress and anxiety. The existential delirium caused by the natural forces of COVID-19 created a sense of hopelessness and an unending trauma among all people (Kaur, 2021). The feeling of low meaningfulness in life also characterizes its severity; Schnell (2010) says when human beings experience a crisis of identity, absurdity and self-destruction appear. Lehan (1959) says the absurdity of the existential situation heightened the constant sense of confusion among the thespians. According to Yalom (1980), these confusions are faced as forced isolation, suffering, mental and economic deprivation, meaninglessness, responsibility, and psychological disorders. Similarly, the threat of mortality rate fostered the growth of panic-stricken behaviours within and across society. According to Ingram (2016), the inclusion and exclusion of the affective dimensions and the feeling of impending fear endangered the prevalent social contract. This social nature of suffering connotes the theory of Satre's idea of existentialism, where human beings face the cruelty of the natural force not just as mere living creatures but as a community where a multitude of others' suffering is induced (Udokang, 2016).

Therefore, people of all facets encountered existential difficulties regarding livelihood, economic stability, social security, and psychological issues during the pandemic. Similarly, Nicomedes et al. (2020) opine that the art and entertainment industries' cohabitation and simultaneous confrontation with the delirious crisis exhibit their survival and existential struggles to cope with the new and changing realities. The threat of mortality, isolation, hopelessness, sleeping disorder, frustration, the nothingness of life, crisis of identity, economic loss, social distancing, and separateness from others made the art sectors face an astute existential threat. These threats are viewed as economic, cognitive, and behavioural. Butėnaitė et al. (2016) connote the three aspects of existential crisis: economic, social, and psychological. Therefore, the researchers used these three aspects to portray the existential dilemma of the select Bangladeshi performing artists. For this, they adopted and adapted the survey reports of Scott & Weems (2012) that focused on the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire, the Existential Concerns Questionnaire of Bruggen et al. (2017), and finally, the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale-short form by Carleton et al. (2007).

Bangladeshi art and entertainment industries faced this hard reality caused by the pandemic. The selected Bangladeshi thespians were interviewed regarding the impact of the pandemic on them. They reconnoitered that, like all other sectors, their sectors faced an indelible impact in terms of economic, psychological, and social loss. So, they embraced digital platforms, Bengali language, and literature for online performances and creative expression (Hasan et al., 2021). This shift presented both opportunities and challenges as performers adapted to new virtual spaces. Government interventions and support programs were crucial during the pandemic. Research by Rahman and Hossain (2020) highlighted the importance of policy measures and financial aid to sustain the arts and cultural sector in Bangladesh. Despite the hardships, the artistic community in Bangladesh demonstrated resilience and solidarity. Collaborative initiatives and fundraisers emerged to support struggling performers (Alam & Ahmed, 2020).

Hence, this paper attempts to grasp how the new reality has impacted the select Bangladeshi thespians regarding their survival, existence, and role during the pandemic. Though there has been an abundance of surveys worldwide based on the effect of the pandemic on the performing art industries, this context lacked proper attention in Bangladesh. Therefore, as there is a relative dearth of literature on the effect of the pandemic on the Bangladeshi art industries, the study tries to detect the survival strategies of Bangladeshi theatre artists, considering their social, economic, and psychological prospects. It also tries to embrace and sense the spirit of notable performing artists to make ordinary people feel relaxed during the Covid-19 crisis.

2.1 Objectives of the Study

a) To examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic, social, and psychological aspects of Bangladeshi theatre artists.

b) To identify the survival strategies adopted by Bangladeshi theatre artists during the pandemic.

c) To explore the role of Bangladeshi theatre artists in society during the Covid-19 crisis and how they contributed to reviving hope and changing realities.

d) To provide insights into the challenges faced by Bangladeshi theatre artists during the pandemic and how their experiences can inform policies and strategies to support artists during crises.

2.2 Research Questions

This research attempts to focus on the following research questions:

a) What kinds of survival and existential challenges are faced by the select Bangladeshi performing artists during the pandemic?

b) How do they face economic, social, and psychological paranoia during the COVID-19 outbreak?

c) How do they adapt to the new reality to resurge people's hope and imagination?

3. Methodology

This section presents how the research considers the population, sampling, research method, and data collection and analysis procedures.

3.1 Population and Sampling

Bangladeshi people in the art and entertainment sectors like music, theatre, and dance are considered the population for this study. The article sample included fifty-five (55) thespians residing in Meherpur, Bangladesh's small district. They were closely attached to the

entertainment sector, namely 'Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy.' They were randomly chosen to solicit the questionnaire data. Although 65 artists were chosen as the sample; finally, 55 of them responded positively. Among them, 39 were male, and 16 were female. Furthermore, 15 artists involved and held the charges of 'Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy' of Meherpur were interviewed both offline and online about the impact of the pandemic on them and how they could overcome it.

3.2 Research Instruments for Data Collection

The study incorporates a mixed-method research design. The paper uses offline and online surveys as some of the selected artists were physically available at the research site, 'Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy', Meherpur, and some were not then. Therefore, a survey questionnaire was administered to the target listed performing artists, including their economic, social, and psychological aspects, based on the existential theory, to collect quantitative data. For the offline survey, the questionnaire was handed over to 51 theatre artists, and 46 responded accurately. Similarly, 14 questionnaires were directed to the artists for online surveys, and 9 of them correctly filled out the questionnaire. Moreover, Google Forms were used as an online tool to accumulate their responses. Besides, a semi-structured interview was conducted using online and offline platforms with the artists of Meherpur to solicit qualitative data. The data was recorded first and later transcribed into texts. Therefore, the study encompasses a quantitative questionnaire and qualitative interview data to explore the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on select Bangladeshi performing artists. The survey questionnaire was prepared based on three parts: the challenges faced in economic, social, and psychological prospects. Each section includes 3 to 4 sub-themes of existential challenges faced by the artists. Moreover, participants' perceptions of alternative ways to face a new reality and their role in society during the pandemic are also sought after using the questionnaire.

3.3 Data Analysis Techniques

Firstly, the offline and online questionnaire responses and the recorded audio clip of the artists' interviews are documented and collected to analyze the data. The data collected from the offline survey questionnaire are put into SPSS, version 20, software. Correspondingly, the online survey data are also set into the SPSS software. As the online survey data is minimal, only nine are set manually to the software to analyze the data coherently. Thus, MS Excel and SPSS software are used in this research study to demonstrate the relative frequencies and percentages of the participants' perceptions regarding their struggle and survival strategy. Furthermore, the Likert scale is introduced to distribute the variation of the artists' perceptions of the impact of the pandemic. Likewise, to analyze interview data, the audio clips are first heard and later transcribed into texts.

4. Discussions and Findings

This part presents the findings of the survey questionnaire and interview data of this research study.

Question 1: What types of survival challenges are faced in the art sectors in Bangladesh?
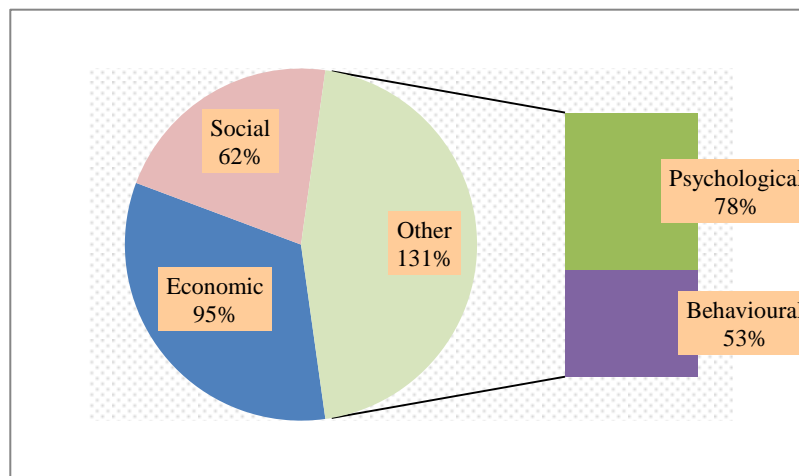

Figure 1. Artists' perception of the types of survival challenges they faced during the pandemic

The respondents were asked about the sectors where they faced the grim reality of the pandemic. 95% of artists (n=52) exposed the economic sectors as the most vulnerable area. The interview data (13 artists) revealed that many of them could not earn appropriately due to the abrupt shutdown of all cultural activities and forced quarantine. As a result, many artists became jobless and suffered acutely. Similarly, 78% of participants (n=43) opined that they suffered terribly from mental trauma as people were dying alarmingly around them. Likewise, 14 artists posit in the interview that the psychological impact was acute. Also, as all social communication was cut off, 62% said that it affected them socially, and lastly, 53% of artists showed that the effect of the pandemic changed their behavioural prospects.

Question 2: To what extent does the pandemic affect the art sectors economically, socially, and psychologically?
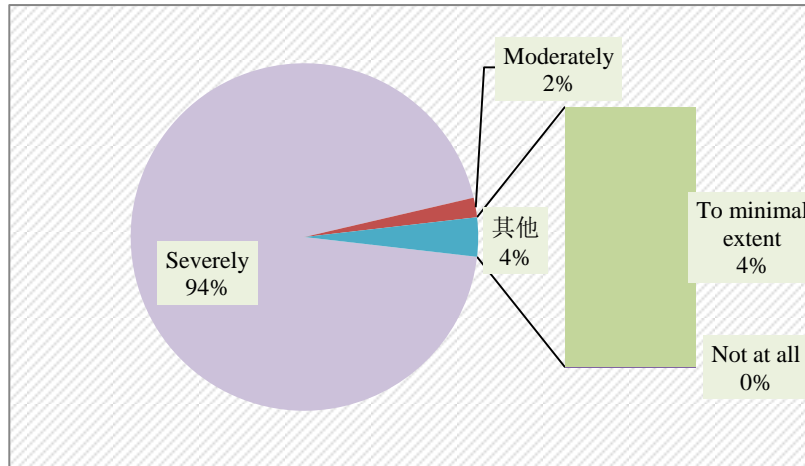
Figure 2. Artists' perception of the extent of the pandemic on them

Figure 2 presents the artists' perception of the extent to which they face economic, social, and psychological survival challenges during the pandemic. 94% of respondents (n=52) agreed that it affected them severely, whereas 4% opined that it had minimal impact on them, and 2% revealed that it moderately affected the art sectors.

Surprisingly, no one agreed on the point that it had no impact at all on them. The interview result (14 interviewees) also postulates that it severely impacted their whole lives. "The artists who took it as a profession suffered a lot and lived a paralyzed life at home, absent from all their cultural and entertainment activities" (response 1).

Question 3: What types of economic challenges did you face in the art sectors in Bangladesh?

Figure 3 projects the artists' perception of the economic challenges they faced during the lockdown period. Because of the pandemic, 93% of artists (n=51) lost their identities. In the interview, one of the respondents uttered that "the economic crisis was severe among the artists as many of them worked for cultural projects like 'Information Centre for Cultural Representation', which was stopped abruptly. Thus, they remained unpaid. As a result, the identity they belonged to was lost at that time. Besides, some artists became involved with the agricultural farms to sustain their livelihood" (response 2), and 60% of artists agreed that they switched to different professions. Another artist exposed that "around 25 to 30 cultural personals who are very close to me were dependent on the art sectors, and their suffering was indescribable as they could not earn properly and switch to other professions getting no options" (response 3).
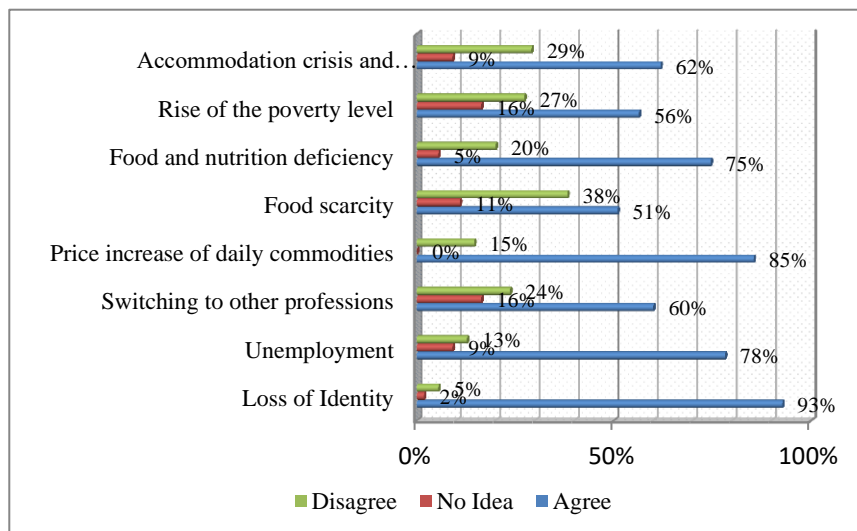

Figure 3. Artists' perception of the existential threat faced by economic issues

Another of them opined that "if there remains no financial solvency and support, from where the stream of art will come to make us and people entertain" (response 4).

Equally, 78% agreed that as their income source stopped, they became unemployed for an unending period, though 13% disagreed with that view. Because of the economic fall-down, prices of daily commodities soared alarmingly, and 85% of respondents faced this grim reality. This situation created a customary food scarcity: "People who were a bit solvent bought too many daily products at a time to stock, not

thinking of mid-ranged earning people who were not able to buy with high prices" (response 5). 51% agreed with this statement, though 38% neglected that. Therefore, low-income artists suffered terribly from food and nutrition deficiency; 75% agreed with this view. One of the interviewees opined that "the economic situation for our family was so bad that we had to have one meal a day for many days, and sometimes we had to eat only rice and dal" (response 6). Likewise, this economic instability made some artists leave the urban areas and migrate to rural homes. Thus, 62% of participants opined that they suffered accommodation problems acutely. These economic factors raised the poverty level, and 56% agreed, though 27% disagreed with that view.

Question 4: What types of psychological challenges did you face during the pandemic?

Figure 4 shows the artists' perception of the psychological trauma they faced because of the pandemic. The sudden halt of their cultural activities created a sense of meaninglessness, uncertainty, and emptiness among them. 78% and 95% agreed with that view. One of the artists said, "as we could not rehearse and practice our cultural activities, our internal development was postponed. As a result, we became restless and felt a kind of emptiness within ourselves" (response 6). 85% of artists exposed that they became stressed, frustrated, and anxious seeing the devastating effect of the pandemic that created a feeling of insomnia, and 71% of the participants faced it. This new reality made them unhappy, sad, and depressed. 87% and 82% of artists sensed this psychological paranoia. All these affective factors distorted their everyday life, and they were unable to behave normally. Therefore, 80% responded that they faced social humiliation.
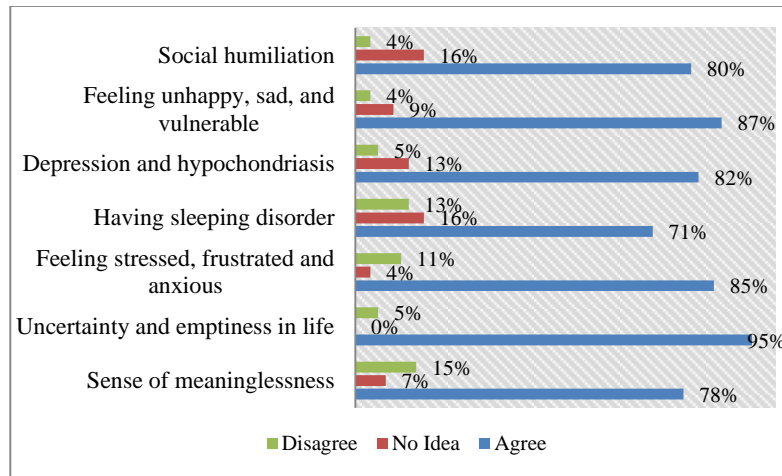

Figure 4. Artists' perception of the existential threat faced in psychological issues

Question 5: What types of social challenges did you face during the pandemic?

The art sectors and the artists' activities are mainly based on their involvement with social services and communities. Regrettably, the pandemic stopped all social gatherings and communication, making the art sector vulnerable. Figure 5 points out the social challenges faced by Bangladeshi artists. 95% of respondents exposed that the upheaval of the pandemic stopped all physical shows; hence, 71% of artists opined that social communication and gatherings were discarded. The majority of them, 84%, could not accept that social distancing, which made them secluded from all activities, and 89% agreed with that view. Artists believe in social ties and relationships, but 75% of them opined that it was also hampered due to corona.

Therefore, they tried to use online platforms, but 67% posited that poor network issues and a lack of electronic gadgets made it impossible to continue. Besides, as an alternative way to survive, they tried to perform online; nevertheless, a significant majority, 91% of samples, revealed no financial support was available to continue their proceedings.
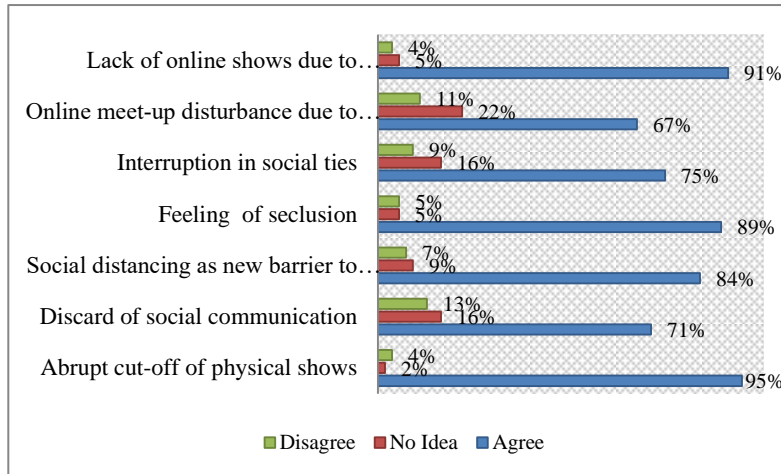
Figure 5. Artists' perception of the existential threat faced in social issues

Question 6: What types of alternative activities did you do to face the new realities?

Figure 6 presents the artists' frequency in terms of the percentage of alternative accomplishments to face that reality. A significant majority, 89%, postulated that they focused on their hobbies like playing inside, painting, singing, reading books and magazines, and writing prose and poetry. Similarly, 85% of thespians agreed that they revealed themselves to the Almighty by praying and meditating.

The interview data (9 participants) also points out that they tried to resort to religion to heal them internally. Alternatively, 73% opined that they became engaged with social media to keep themselves busy and mentally well. Accordingly, 65% of the thespians agreed that they kept themselves active and busy by doing different kinds of physical exercises. Two of the artists exposed that "we tried to keep ourselves active through online discussions and also we used household chores like plate, glass, utensils to create new types of entertainment activities to reach the common people" (response 7). More than half of the artists, 58%, agreed they watched TV and documentaries to be psychologically stable.
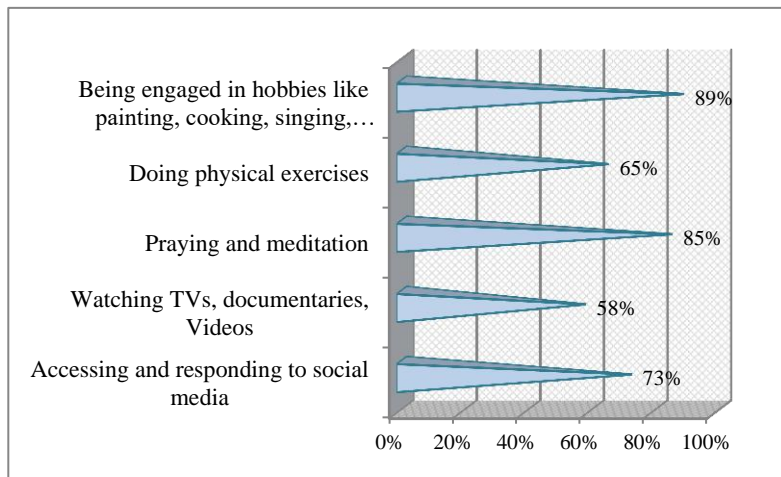

Figure 6. Artists' perception of the alternative activities they tried to be involved

Question 7: What types of activities did you do to revive ordinary people?

Figure 7 reveals the tasks they tried to accomplish to revive ordinary people. 84% agreed that they used online platforms, mainly Zoom, to broadcast online shows, performances, songs, and dances, though they could hardly manage financial support to continue these activities. While performing and communicating online, they also employed the Bengali language as an emblem of strength and unity. One of the participants stated that, sometimes, they recited poems from the Bangladeshi national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam's poem, like "Bidrohi" (The Rebel), to make the people invigorated. Similarly, they arranged online discussions based on cultural prospects to motivate their community and outsiders. Though 95% of the online theatre activities were conducted in Bengali, 5% of them were in English.
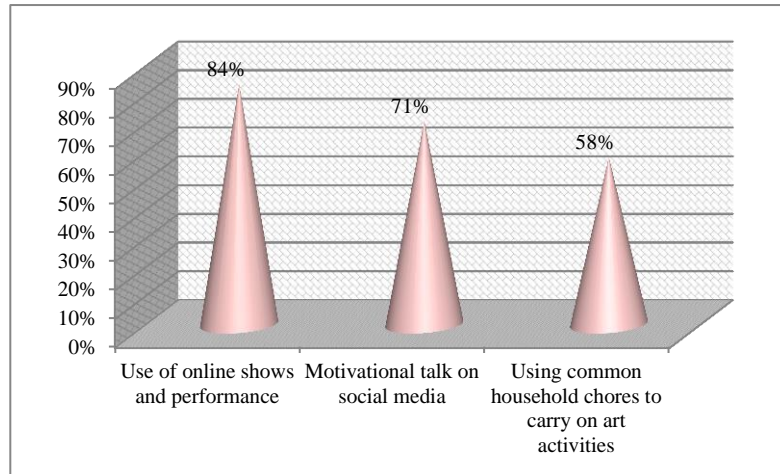
Figure 7. Artists' perception of the role played by them for ordinary people

Regarding the selection of the Bengali language, one of the artists said that "the people with whom we dealt during corona were mostly from middle and upper-middle class. They mostly use the Bengali language to communicate. We used this language so that they could easily get the point that we wanted to give. Besides, few students were involved there. So, we did not need English too much to use. Besides, being a distant district of Bangladesh, Meherpur, we feel comfortable in using Bengali to portray our art" (response 9). Notwithstanding, 58% used their daily accessories like household chores and common home spaces to create a new form of entertainment activity.

5. Overall Findings

The research revealed that the notable thespians of Bangladesh had undergone severe existential dilemmas during the whole period of lockdown due to the pandemic. The survey questionnaire and the interview data posited that they faced an extreme economic, psychological, and social threat that ultimately made them unemployed for a more extended period, obliged them to be engaged with agriculture to run their family, lost their identity, and created food scarcity, causing nutrition deficiency. It also forced them to leave urban areas, and 6 of the artists said "We had to leave the city and move to our village as we could not pay the rent for three months. This economic instability humiliated us, and we were forced to migrate to the village and started working on farms" (response 8). Therefore, the cut-off of income of the artists for an uncertain period made them psychologically distressed, frustrated, isolated, and created sleeping disorders. One of the interviewees shared that "the breakdown of our cultural activity and the income source disappointed me as these were the sources of my mental health and financial security. As a result, I could not sleep properly night after night and behave properly with others" (response 9). Likewise, the social distancing and the forced quarantine stopped social communication. As a result, the social ties and bondage weakened, and the artists faced social barriers in ensuing their cultural activities. Therefore, the study found that the artists' economic, psychological, and social sufferings were beyond description at the coronavirus time.

5.1 Coping Strategies

The artists tried to engage in different alternative activities to cope with the new realities. The research indicated that the artists:

- They used online platforms, mainly 'Zoom,' to carry out their activities as they were not allowed to gather physically at that time.

- Arranged an online motivational discussion on *"Art Against Corona"* in the district of Meherpur, Bangladesh, with the help of the authority from 'Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy'.

- Arranged a program online *on 'The Celebration of the Birth Centenary of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibar Rahman"* to keep the cultural activities on.

- Arranged an online competition on drawing and writing essays on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibar Rahman.

- 'The Arani Theatre' and *'The Literary Society of Meherpur'* kept the artists busy on a small scale by involving them with writing banners and making festoons so that they would not be frustrated losing their jobs.

- Arranged a drama by inviting *'The Group Theatre'* from Dhaka to make the ordinary people motivated.

- Donated a supply of food and money to the vulnerable artists.

- Became engaged with meditation and physical exercises and invited people to follow these to heal mental illness.

- They mainly used L1 to portray their art and creativity. To some extent, a few of the artists experienced in English conducted motivational sessions for school-level students in English using different inspirational stories found in books and the internet. The sessions organized by the theatre helped the learners be inspired to use English in everyday life and focus on the meaning

of life (Alam et al., 2023, Alam, 2023). Though it was not so well structured, it somehow helped the school-going students of Meherpur to be optimistic about their lives. The online session was accomplished keeping in mind the mental health of the young learners as many of them were committing suicide at that time in Bangladesh as the schools were closed and all social mobilities were stopped permanently. Therefore, the role that artists played and their use of the English language for the younger generation served as valuable sources of motivation and contributed to their language development. Drama and theatrical exercises are thus vital for students' language development by providing excellent avenues for communication, even when their mastery of language skills is limited (Alam, karim & Ahmad, 2020; Alam, 2022, Alam & Alhawamdeh, 2022, Mahant et al., 2023). They can employ physical expressions and gestures to convey their intentions when interacting with others (Bas, 2008, Sharma & Sohaib, 2018, P.1084). Accordingly, though the artists and young school-going audiences were not competent in English, the session helped them understand expressions.

The study found that the artists tried a lot to secure themselves and the masses from the trauma caused by the pandemic. Though the artists and the art organization 'Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy of Meherpur' tried to help the artists economically and financially, they were inadequate. One artist opined that 'they donated to some artists, but they were not ample as the amount was only 1200 taka per month. With this bit of money, it was quite difficult for us to run a family at that time" (response 10). Besides, 3 of the artists postulated that "the art sector is the most vulnerable one in Bangladesh as there is no proper guardian for this sector. Thus, the artists' conditions are also miserable as there is no proper appreciation for them in society; rather, people humiliate them. Our condition is like the make-up that is used in stages. People appreciate us when we are on stage with make-up, but when the make-up is removed after the shows, people forget us" (response 11).

Therefore, the research is insightful as it represents the actual scenario of Bangladesh's artists and art sector during and after the pandemic. It exposes the acute vulnerability of the artists that they encountered at the time of corona. Instead of all these, they tried their best to revive themselves and the mass people from the trauma using online platforms, meditation, social media, and L1 language exposure. Additionally, the artists can use their knowledge and skills to showcase the social cause and awareness using different strategies and theatrical techniques. Previously some studies Alam et al., (2022); Alam & Hameed (2023), Alam & Usama (2023) have demonstrated the same in their research.

6. Conclusion

The onset of the coronavirus had plunged the whole world into a terrible existential crisis. The crisis was also experienced in the art and entertainment sectors in Bangladesh. The study attempted to delve into the existential threats faced by the artists of Meherpur, Bangladesh, in terms of three aspects: economic, psychological, and social issues. Similarly, it portrayed their role to face that uninviting reality and to make people rejuvenate. The study found that the impact of the pandemic was devastating in the art sectors as many became unemployed, jobless, lost identity, lost accommodation, became stressed, frustrated, paranoiac, had insomnia, and finally lost social bondage and communication because of quarantine. Despite this, they tried to face the existential crises by seeking alternative measures like being engaged in online discussion, meditation, praying to the Almighty, and using household things like utensils as musical instruments to create new themes of art and culture during the pandemic using the L1. Hence, the article exposed that though the artists were in a degraded economic and psychological state, their role was praiseworthy to revive themselves and the general public as the artists were mended for the internal well-being of society.

7. Future Scope of Study

The research article on the survival of Bangladeshi theatre artists during the COVID-19 pandemic provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by artists in the entertainment industry. The study highlights the economic, social, and psychological impacts of the pandemic on the artists and how they adapted to the new reality. Besides, how the use of L1 and L2 affects the socio-cultural prospects of the theatre industry can also be something to work on. The findings of this research can be used to develop policies and strategies to support artists during crises. Future research can build on this study by exploring the experiences of artists in other countries and regions and comparing them to the findings of this study. Additionally, future research can investigate the long-term effects of the pandemic on the theatre industry and how it has changed the way artists work and interact with their audiences. Overall, this research article provides a solid foundation for future studies on the survival of artists during crises.

8. Recommendations

- *Provide financial support to artists during crises*: The study highlights the economic impact of the pandemic on Bangladeshi theatre artists. Governments and other organizations can provide financial support to artists during crises to help them sustain their livelihoods.

- *Develop alternative platforms for artists to showcase their work*: Pandemic-like situation forces artists to adapt to new ways of working and interacting with their audiences. Governments and other organizations can develop alternative platforms for artists to showcase their work, such as online performances and exhibitions.

- *Promote the role of artists in society*: The study highlights the important role played by Bangladeshi theatre artists in reviving hope and changing realities during the pandemic. Governments and other organizations can promote the role of artists in society and provide them with opportunities to contribute to social and cultural development.

- *Conduct further research on the impact of crises on artists*: The study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Bangladeshi theatre artists during the pandemic. Further research can be conducted to explore the impact of crises on artists in

other countries and regions and to identify best practices for supporting artists during crises. Besides, how native and non-native languages play a role in facilitating the theatre text to the audience can be researched further.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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