

## EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC CONTAINMENT MEASURES ON SOCIAL INTERACTIONS WITHIN FAMILIES IN KIAMBU COUNTY KENYA

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### ABSTRACT

*This study assessed the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on social interactions within families in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County. The specific study objectives were to examine effects of COVID-19 on social interactions between parents and their children, siblings to siblings, spouses to spouses and suggested mitigation strategies to challenges posed by COVID-19 on family life and social interactions. The study was guided by two theories: family system theory and social impact theory. The study employed mixed research design, which allowed quantitative and qualitative data to be collected. The study target population was 58,264 households in Ruiru Sub-County. Yamane (1967) formula was used to determine a sample of 396 households for the study. The study participants were selected from the study area using simple random sampling. The study also involved 10 key informants who were 6 social workers and 4 chiefs. Semi-structured questionnaires were used to collect primary data. Quantitative data was collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics and presented by frequency tables using Microsoft Excel while qualitative data was analyzed through narrative analysis and presented through narrations. Study findings showed that containment measures due to COVID-19 pandemic ensured families spent more time together than it was usual affected social interaction in families between parents and their children and between spouses. However, the social interaction in families between siblings was not affected by the containment measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that the containment measures negatively impacted social interactions between parents and children and between spouses will benefit policy makers and social practitioners in preparing and responding to pandemics of similar magnitude in case they happen in future to prevent family break-down. The study recommended that the government and other players carry out a critical assessment and measurement of marital, parent-to-child and sibling-to-sibling interactions to inform future policy formulation regarding social interaction in families. The study also recommended that the government establishes intervention measures such as family counseling services that address interaction issues within families in Ruiru sub-County.*

**Key Words:** Pandemic, COVID19, Interventions

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## INTRODUCTION

Quality household interactions which entail relationships between spouses, parents and children and siblings are significant in enhancing sense of belonging, emotional support, personal growth and even communication. A change of household interaction equilibrium can precipitate a change in the quality of interaction aspects in a family. Pandemics have been known to interrupt social interactions including interactions within families. According to Woolhouse and Gowtage-Sequeria (2005), the majority of pandemics have been brought on by the "zoonotic" spread of pathogens from animals to people. Human-animal interactions have increased since domestication, and potentially dangerous zoonoses like avian influenza are still spreading among animal populations (Van Boeckel et al., 2012; Carroll et al., 2018). Numerous viruses, including Ebola, have emerged from wildlife reservoirs into human societies via the hunt and consumption of wildlife species including bush meat, the wild trade, and other contacts with wildlife (Rimoin et al., 2010; Wolfe, Dunavan, & Diamond 2007). These viruses have affected human social interactions. For Example, when Ebola broke out in March 2014 in Southern Guinea, most countries cancelled flights to West African countries that were affected by the virus (Ebola Disease Outbreak Locations, 2024). Apart from cancellation of flights there was while there was cessation of movement out of and into the affected areas.

The H1N1 virus, swine flu with an avian gene that spread from 1918 to 1919, was to blame for this pandemic, which was the worst in recent human history. In the spring of 1918, the first case of the pandemic was discovered in the military in the United States. A third of the world's population at the time, or approximately 500 million individuals, were thought to have been infected by the swine flu virus. An estimated fifty (50) million people died worldwide, with just roughly 675,000 of the deaths taking place in the United States.

In the filoviridae family of viruses is the genus Ebolavirus, which causes the rare but severe disease known as Ebola virus disease (EVD). It is spread from person to person by contaminated needles, broken skin, mucous membranes, urine, faeces, saliva, and other bodily fluids. It is transmitted by wild animals (Rewar & Mirdha, 2014; Feldman et al., 2011). The average case fatality of EVD in 1976 was around 50% and case fatality rates vary from 25% to 90% depending on the species and strain of the virus (Sanchez et al., 2007). The EVD patients show symptoms such as high fever, headache, vomiting, anorexia, diarrhea, and muscle aches. In the advanced stages, there is bleeding in the eyes, gums, nose, and gut (Goejienbier et al., 2014).

On 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020, and 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) categorized the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic and a public health emergency of great global concern respectively. As of 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020, China had 12,167 suspected cases and 7,736 confirmed cases. The WHO proclaimed the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on the same day that 82 confirmed cases were found in 18 more countries (Burki, 2020). The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya was first reported on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and the subsequent health emergency led to several restrictive measures which changed normal ways of interactions within the family and other social setups. Educational institutions were closed at the end of 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020. Containment measures such as quarantine, social distancing became necessary, leading to general closure of almost all public spaces including business establishments and activities except for essential services such as health and security. It was only food, security and health sectors that operated on a strict schedule and on limited hours observing the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Health.

This however affected how families interacted, interaction between parents, sibling to siblings, spouses to spouses shifted to new norms that brought both positive and negative impacts to families. Parent time, especially women's time, was spent caring for children due to school closures and orders to stay at home (Keskinocak et al., 2020; Calarco et al., 2020; Sevilla & Smith, 2020). The couple interactions during COVID-19 gave rise to both positive and negative social aspects. For instance, COVID-19 containment measures like lockdowns and curfews made couples spend more time together, which encourages couples to have pleasant sexual experiences as well as the sharing of family concerns. Only when there is no intradyadic

stress does time spent together increase intimacy. However, the COVID-19 pandemic might have had severe societal repercussions to harm couples (Milek et al., 2015).

Thus, the purpose of this study will be to examine the effect of COVID-19 on family life and social interactions in Ruiru Sub County, Kiambu County. The study will also demonstrate the link between studied variables and family social interactions so as to answer to knowledge gaps about the study subject. The findings of the study will offer interventional strategies to prevent unforeseen pandemics that might lead to confinement in the future. Milek et al. (2015) shared that time only improves intimacy if there is no extra-dyadic stress.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Since humans are social animals/beings, they are relationship-oriented creatures and prefer to keep usual routines with other people. Restrictions of movement of people imposed by the Government of Kenya as one of the containment measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 affected the families' relations in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County in a number of ways. It might have led to the increased bonding within the families as most of the family members were forced to be together most of the time due to restrictions of movement. The containment measures could have also led to the strained household interactions as a result of prolonged periods of spending time together among family members resulting in negative social aspects such as domestic violence, increased conflicts and communication breakdown. Movement restrictions saw spouses spend more time together than was usual as employers were required to allow workers to work from home to avoid physical contact between employees. Companies which required the physical presence of their employees closed down to allow time for the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that couples had more time to spend together than when they spent time apart while working. Also, schools were closed down and learners sent home as a measure to restrict physical interaction between learners. This also meant that parents spent more time together with their children as siblings also had more time to spend together since schools were closed.

Several studies worldwide have explored the issue of household interactions (Scharp & Hall, 2019; Shaligram, 2021; & Toseeb, 2022). However, these studies have not examined the effect of COVID-19 containment measures on household interactions. Therefore, this study sought to establish effects of COVID-19 containment measures on household interactions in Ruiru sub-county, Kiambu County, Kenya.

### **Objective of the Study**

This study assessed the effects of COVID19 on social interactions within the family setup in Ruiru Kiambu County, Kenya. The study was guided by the following specific objectives:

- To explore the effects of COVID-19 pandemic containment measures affected the interaction between parents and their children in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya.
- To establish the effects of COVID-19 pandemic containment measures on interactions between siblings in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya.
- To explore the effects of COVID-19 pandemic containment measures on interactions between spouses in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya.
- To suggest interventional strategies of addressing the issues of social interactions that families faced during COVID-19 pandemic in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Infected families have experienced social, economic, and psychological effects as a result of the recent COVID-19 outbreak, which has become a global public health issue and a health danger (Das et al., 2020). This led to many countries across the world including Kenya to adopt containment measures such as

lockdown, travel restrictions within and outside the country, social distancing, closure of all public places such as schools, churches, and mosques as well as cancellation of all sporting tournaments and events and embracing the WHO guidelines to combat the spread of this global public health (Nigam, 2020).

Lockdown persisted as a result of the COVID-19, which helped to slow the spread of the virus and drastically lower infection rates. However, this led to the emergence of a new public health crisis with negative consequences of lockdown such as social, economic as well as psychological consequences. There was a marked increase in cases of domestic violence, which led to physical and emotional injuries on the victim, low self-esteem in the victim and the children, anxiety, depression among many other consequences (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). According to a study by Graham-Harrison et al. (2020), instances of domestic abuse increased in many COVID-19-affected nations, including China, Germany, and the UK.

Family estrangement is on the rise, as common as divorce. Those involved often experienced pain and alienation especially during COVID-19 isolation and confinement measures. Family estrangement occurs when one family member tries to distance/isolate himself/herself from others because of longstanding negativity in the relationship. The media and research studies have shown that this is not the case, as high levels of adverse parenting and low levels of positive parenting result in children who are stressed out, have issues with their family relationships, and are more susceptible to peer pressure, which can turn them against their parents (Lanjekar et al., 2022). Some children (now-adults) may choose to reduce or stop communicating with one or both of their parents. Children are frequently the targets of violence, poor parenting, betrayal, mental disorder, insensitive behaviour, toxicity, and drug and alcohol abuse. Family ties and relationships are taught to be non-voluntary, whether for good or bad, and that the bond between parents and children cannot be severed. Wherever family breakdown happens, in most cases it leaves both parties unprepared, and their grief often goes unrecognized.

In order to ascertain how COVID-19 affected these relationships, Karp et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study on young relationships in the COVID-19 era involving adolescent girls and young women in Kenya. To learn more about how young people's perceptions of intimate relationships changed during COVID-19, inductive theme analysis was used to evaluate qualitative information gathered from in-depth interviews with 76 paired youth between the ages of 15 and 24. By influencing partners' sexual and reproductive health (SRH), COVID-19 effects may impede the growth of healthy young relationships. The factors influencing relationship quality dynamics and SRH outcomes were investigated using bivariate and multivariate logistic regression. Findings revealed that about 75% of young people reported changes in the quality of their relationships after the outbreak, with 24% saying that less time spent with partners has gotten worse. This finding was the best predictor of decreased relationship quality. There was a correlation between youth who lost their partial or full household income and deterioration of their relationships. A thorough investigation showed how COVID-19 mitigation efforts hampered close friendships, school closures, rushed marriages, and females' reliance on their partners for financial support.

Zhang et al. (2022) studied how COVID-19 impacted sibling relationship qualities in Chinese setting. Through a web-based survey, 154 parents provided information on the sibling relationships of their kindergarten students aged 3 to 6. The descriptive information and correlations analysis revealed that there was good interaction and acceptance between the siblings. Toseeb (2022) conducted a study on sibling conflict in households with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) prior to and following the first lockdown in the United Kingdom. Between 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and 10<sup>th</sup> October 2020, 504 parents of children with this condition completed an online questionnaire (more than half responded to the survey more than once). As lockdowns persisted, children with this disease were slightly more likely to be singled out or injured by their siblings compared to earlier lockdown phases, but there was no difference in how often they themselves picked on or hurt other siblings. Young individuals with SEND, severe, or complicated needs were

slightly safeguarded from conflict after lockdown, however not at the same rate as it was during the first month of lockdown.

The Kenyan government ought to re-think about making provision of e-health, telehealth, and telemedicine services to most part of Kenya which can be integrated in healthcare. This will go a long way in managing future pandemics during lockdowns. These services bring (with it a host of benefits to patients, health care providers and the citizens as it reduces reduction if hospitalization, readmissions, and cost of healthcare as well as increase medication adherence (Orlando et al., 2019). Health education should also be incorporated in the curriculum. Help for learners who are poor, have special needs, are vulnerable, or are marginalized is necessary. This disease has caused an extremely serious social, cultural, and economic reaction over the entire planet. The poor, underprivileged, and vulnerable members of society are the ones who are most negatively impacted.

### **Family Systems Theory**

According to this theory, a family is a complex social organization whose members interact and influence one another's behaviour. The theory was formulated in 1988 by Kerre and Bowen. Parents are acknowledged to play a crucial influence in the development and expression of children's emotions and actions, according to the theory (Miller et al. 2000). The fundamental focus of family system theory is on the behavioural exchange that occurs in every instance of interaction between family members. It asserts that family contact patterns influence both problematic and non-problematic behaviour. These relationships between family members are thought to be crucial for comprehending human behavior and emotions. By focusing on the interactions that take place between people, the theory also helps in determining the nature of relations (Johnson & Ray, 2016).

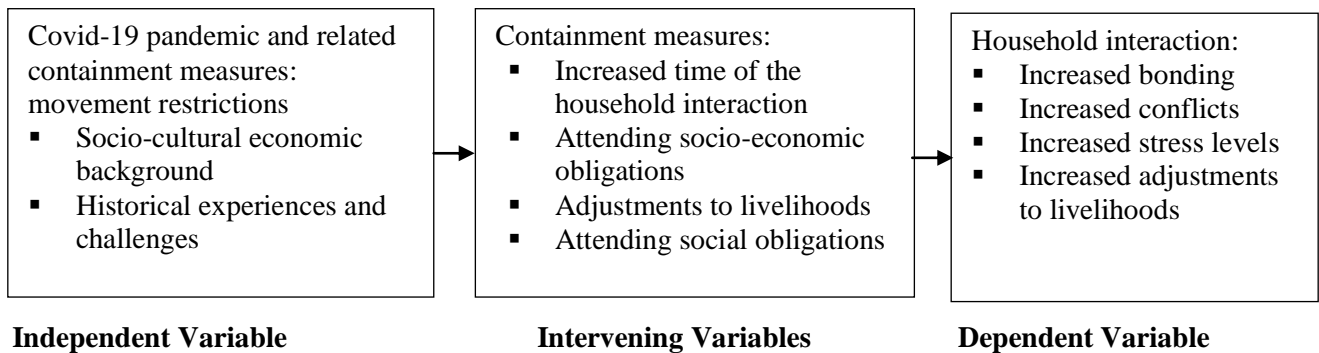
Due to the adoption of stay-at-home orders, closures, and disruptions in parents' return to work during the epidemic, children's interactions with others were typically confined to their immediate family members (Fegert et al., 2020). Parents had a significant impact on how their children behaved and felt about the epidemic. Due to fewer working hours and lower incomes that could not support families throughout the epidemic, majority of adults experienced longer stretches of less activity, more screen time, and mental health issues than they had previously (Liang et al., 2020). In addition, children in Kenya and around the world were less likely to adhere to the pandemic's recommendations for physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and sleep than those whose parents experienced less stress (Deng et al., 2021). Additionally, studies show that rigorous parenting behaviours, such as trying to micro-manage everything the child does, are positively connected with all adverse emotions experienced by parents, such as anger, fury, loneliness, and melancholy (Wissemann et al., 2021). Extensive research has been done on how other parenting factors, such as how often parents communicate with their children, how they feel about them, and how close they are to their children, may affect their emotional and behavioural problems as well as their lifestyle decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Social Impact Theory**

The theory was coined by psychologist Latane (1981). The goal of social impact theory is to clarify how impacts are shared by either the majority or the minority. According to Latane, the strength, immediateness, and number of the sources will have a multiplicative effect on the impacts made by either the majority or the minority because of forces operating in the social field. Strength is a measure of an effect source's social presence and its encompassing power, which varies depending on its positions and authorities. The impact on society increases with source strength. The term "immediacy" describes how close sources of information or action are to the people they are affecting. Finally, the total number of sources comprises the total number of sources with individual influence. According to studies, the social impact theory framework provides a useful explanation of how individuals are affected by other social settings in terms of communication and social gatherings (Chang et al., 2018). Likewise, social impact theory can show how forces active in the social sphere are entangled with the events and how others are affected by them through time (Lin, et al., 2019). In

the current study, social impact theory was used to analyze how the COVID-19 pandemic affects family social interactions.

### Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

### METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed research approach in which both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. The study was carried out in four Wards in Ruiru Sub-County namely, Biashara, Mwiki, Gitothua and Kahawa Sukari. Ruiru sub-county is in Kiambu County that is within the Nairobi Metropolitan area. The target population for the study was households consisting of family related members (unit of people living in same house but for the purpose of this study only family members were included and excluded employees and visitors or non-family members). Based on the Kenyan Population and Housing Census (2019), related updates and administrative records, the number of the households in the four Wards was Mwiki 16,234, Kahawa Sukari 12,442, Biashara 13,049 and Gitothua 16,539, resulting to a population of 58,264 households.

Yamane (1967) formula for small or finite populations was used to calculate the sample size for this study. The sample size was determined at 396 households that were randomly selected. Primary and secondary data were employed. To gather quantitative data, descriptive survey questions were supplied to the participants selected and informed consent has been obtained. The questionnaire contained both structured and unstructured questions. A Likert scale questionnaire was used to provide structured questions and gauge respondents' opinions regarding diverse viewpoints on family interactions during COVID-19.

The quantitative data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel to generate descriptive statistics while qualitative data was analyzed through narrative analysis. Levels of social interactions in families were measured using frequencies and percentages. The findings were presented through frequency tables. Qualitative data mainly from key informants was analyzed for new and recurring themes that aligned with the objectives of the study and presented through narration.

### FINDINGS

#### Response Rate

The number of respondents in the original study sample was 396 households. However, surveys from 370 households were taken into consideration for analysis when the data collection and cleaning procedures were finished. This represented a response rate of 93%.

#### Interactions between Parents and Children during COVID-19 Pandemic

The first objective of the study sought to explore how containment measures affected the interaction between parents and their children. Findings are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Interactions between parents and children during COVID-19 pandemic**

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
1. I have a favourite child in my family	68 (18%)	48 (13%)	32 (9%)	122 (33%)	100 (27%)	370 (100%)
2. I felt free to engage with a particular child in the family but not other children during COVID-19	49 (13%)	66 (18%)	55 (15%)	102 (28%)	98 (26%)	370 (100%)
3. I felt I developed a rift with some of my children during COVID-19	82 (22%)	48 (13%)	39 (11%)	105 (28%)	96 (26%)	370 (100%)
4. My children felt I neglected them during COVID-19 period.	57 (15%)	84 (23%)	36 (10%)	99 (27%)	94 (25%)	370 (100%)
5. The fact that I lived in a family setting, I felt there were unresolved conflicts with my children.	38 (10%)	56 (15%)	83 (22%)	99 (27%)	94 (25%)	370 (100%)

Analysis of results on whether respondents had a favourite member in their family shows that majority of the respondents agreed that they have a favourite family member at 33%, 27% strongly agreed with that assertion, 18% strongly disagreed that they have a favourite family member while 13% of the respondents disagreed that they have a favourite family member. A further 9% remained neutral regarding this assertion. The results show that the majority of the respondents who were parents had a favourite child in the family.

The findings were further supported by revelations by key informant a social worker who stated that:

*“It is assumed to be usual for a parent to have a favourite child. Though this is not always openly stated, there are certain behaviour patterns and actions that prove this to be the case. For example, a parent may buy more gifts for a particular child over the other or a child preferring to talk to one parent over the other. It is possible to take note of such behaviours when families stay together over a prolonged period of time like it happened during the COVID-19 period. My opinion is that the prolonged staying together of families during COVID-19 lockdown might have made families to come to this realization.”*

These findings were supported by study by Lanjekar et al., (2022) which indicated that members within families have favourite family members where parents have a favourite child or children having a favourite parent. The study by Lanjekar et al. (2022) further revealed that staying together between parents and children for prolonged period of time during COVID-19 pandemic period only contributed to revealing the otherwise hidden fact that individuals usually have favourite family members. Another study by Scharp and Hall (2019) reveals that issues such as parents showing open likeness for a particular child over the other is a major contributor of bad relations between parents and other children who may feel less loved by their parents.

Analysis of the study variable that family members felt free to engage with a particular person in the family but not everyone during the COVID-19 period when there was movement restriction that resulted in families spending more time together revealed that majority of the respondents at 28% agreed, 26% strongly agreed, 18% disagreed while a minority at 13% strongly disagreed. A further portion of the respondents, at 15%, were neutral on this assertion. From the findings, it is evident that family members engaged freely with one family member as opposed to all.

These findings are supported by a study by Lanjekar et al. (2022) which indicated that children may choose to communicate with one of their parents and stop communicating with the other. Children have a favourite

parent whom they prefer talking to freely while they restrict their conversations when they are with the other parent. Likewise, parents may want to engage some children freely in conversations over other children.

The findings further reveal that 28% of the respondents agree that they felt they developed a rift with some of their children in the family during the COVID-19 period when they spent more time together as a result of the containment measures introduced to curb the spread of the virus, 26% strongly agree to this statement, 22% strongly disagree while 13% disagree. A further 11% of the respondents remained neutral with regard to this assertion. These findings indicated that the majority of the respondents had a rift with some of their children.

The findings are supported by statements made by key informants. Social workers who were among the key informants revealed that they had encountered cases where family members wanted to live on their own during the COVID-19 period when there were containment measures such as movement restrictions. Most of the cases involved spouses while some involved parents and children. One key informant a social worker was quoted saying:

*“I have encountered cases of spouses wanting to live separately. This intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic period, and I suspect it was due to the prolonged period of spending time together. One case I encountered was that of a husband who sought advice before divorcing his wife of 10 years. The husband said that conversations with his wife were not intelligent at all, and he wondered how he ended up marrying her.”*

The findings are further supported by recent research by Scharp and Dorrance Hall (2019) which indicated that rifts between family members exist because of unresolved issues. The study further revealed that rifts between family members are exacerbated when family members spend more time together as opposed to spending less time together. During the COVID-19 pandemic, containment measures in Ruiru Sub-County that forced parents and children to stay together at home for prolonged periods of time than they usually did played a role in exposing rifts that exist between parents and children.

The findings on whether children felt neglected by their parents indicated that a majority of the respondents at 27% felt that they were neglected by family members, 25% strongly agree, 23% disagree with this assertion while a minority of 15% strongly disagrees with this statement. Another 10% of the participants indicated that they were neutral on this assertion. The findings indicate that majority of the respondents felt neglected by family members as a result of containment measures introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19 in Kenya.

These findings augur with those of Gadermann et al. (2021) which established that cases of attempted suicide and deterioration of mental well-being among teenagers increased during the COVID-19 pandemic when parents had to spend more time together with their children. Children felt neglected by their parents while parents felt that the relationship between them and their children was deteriorating. According to the research, parents felt that their children were not ready or willing to talk to them about issues affecting them.

Analysis of the study variable on whether there is a feeling that respondents live in a family where there are unresolved conflicts between them and their children revealed that a majority of the respondents at 27% agreed with this assertion, 25% strongly agreed, 15% disagreed while a minority of the participants at 10% strongly disagreed with the statement. A further 22% of the respondents indicated that they were neutral on the subject implying that they were not comfortable revealing this information.

Key informants indicated coming across family members seeking advice on unresolved family conflicts during the COVID-19 period. One key informant a chief stated that:

*“Unresolved conflicts in families between spouses or between parents and children are a common occurrence in this area. During the COVID-19 period when containment measures were introduced by the government to curb its spread, these issues came to the fore because families had to stay*



together for longer than usual. I would say that I encountered more cases of people seeking help on how to deal with unresolved conflicts during that period.”

Another key informant a social worker stated that:

“Family conflicts are usually not brought to the attention of counselors unless they get out of control. However, even the small conflicts need to be resolved instead of piling up and getting out of control. COVID-19 lockdown made parents spend more time together with their children. Spouses also had to break from their daily routines and spend more time together. A couple came to seek help after realizing that their son had isolated himself after they told him they did not have finances to buy him a laptop.”

These findings show that the majority of the respondents live in families where there are unresolved conflicts. The findings are congruent with a study by Scharp and Dorrance Hall (2019) which established that families become dysfunctional due to unresolved conflicts emanating from poor communication, financial challenges, frequent arguments, abusive parenting, and drug usage among other issues. The findings are further supported by another research by Lanjekar et al. (2022) which established that aversive parenting results in children developing negative relationships with their parents, and this became pronounced during the COVID-19 period when parents had to spend more time with their children.

The study finds that parents showed that they had favourite children which strained their relationship with other children, parents felt free to engage with one child over the other, there were rifts between parents and children, children felt neglected by their parents and there were unresolved conflicts between parents and children in families. All these are indicators that spending more time together between parents and children during COVID-19 did not improve their interaction, but it worsened it instead. This study therefore concludes that interactions between parents and children were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic containment measures which included restriction of movements that forced families to spend more time together than it was usual in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County.

### Interactions within Families between Siblings

The second objective of the study sought to establish the effects of containment measures on interactions between siblings. The findings are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Interactions in families between siblings**

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
My children expressed themselves freely to one another better during COVID-19 compared to pre-COVID-19	96 (26%)	105 (28%)	66 (18%)	63 (17%)	40 (11%)	<b>370</b> <b>(100%)</b>
My children were open to talking about any elements of their relationship when upset about them better during COVID-19 than pre-COVID-19	91 (25%)	98 (26%)	81 (22%)	56 (15%)	44 (12%)	<b>370</b> <b>(100%)</b>
My children settled disagreements between themselves easily during COVID-19 compared to pre-COVID-19	98 (26%)	110 (30%)	74 (20%)	32 (9%)	56 (15%)	<b>370</b> <b>(100%)</b>
In light of the circumstances, I think the length of time my children spent together did not affect their interactions.	37 (10%)	59 (16%)	78 (21%)	109 (29%)	87 (24%)	<b>370</b> <b>(100%)</b>
My children felt secure with one another just like they did pre-COVID-19.	25 (7%)	42 (11%)	71 (19%)	110 (30%)	122 (33%)	<b>370</b> <b>(100%)</b>

Key: Percentage (n=370)

Results analysis reported in Table 2 shows that majority of the respondents represented by 28% disagreed with the assertion that with children expressed themselves freely to one another better during COVID-19 compared to pre-COVID-19 while 26% strongly disagreed with the statement. A minority of the respondents at 11% strongly agreed with the assertion while 17% agreed. A further 18% of the respondents remained neutral with regards to this assertion.

Statements made by the key informants indicated that the interaction between siblings was above the normal interaction since they spent more time together which would have otherwise been spent in school or with other friends. However, the key informants were of the opinion that the interaction between siblings would not have improved or deteriorated significantly during the COVID-19 period compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. One key informant a social worker stated that:

*“I think parents had more time to observe interactions between their children more closely during the COVID-19 period. They would have easily observed how their children expressed themselves to one another compared to pre-COVID-19 period when parents did not spend much time with their children. The interactions between siblings might have had slight changes because of spending more time together but I honestly do not think there are significant changes.”*

These findings indicate that majority of siblings expressed themselves freely to one another during the COVID-19 period when they spent more time together than usual as a result of the containment measures introduced by the government to curb the spread of the virus. However, the containment measures during the COVID-19 period did not bring much change in how siblings expressed themselves to each other. The findings agree with a study by Zhang et al. (2022) which established that during the COVID-19 period, siblings interacted well with one another just like they did pre-COVID-19. Further, Hughes, Ronchi, Foley, Dempsey, and Lecce (2023) assert that if anything, containment measures during the COVID-19 pandemic strengthened relationships between siblings.

Analysis of the findings regarding the study variable that children were open to talking about any elements of their relationship when upset about them better during the COVID-19 period when containment measures were in place, majority of the respondents at 26% disagreed with the statement while 25% strongly disagreed with the assertion. Minority of the respondents at 12% strongly agreed while 15% agreed with the statement. Those who remained neutral on the statement were 22%.

These findings demonstrate that there were no major changes in how siblings were open to talk about any elements of their relationship that upset them during the COVID-19 period when they spent more time together than usual as a result of the containment measures compared to pre-COVID-19 period.

Regarding the assertion that children settled disagreements between themselves easily when they spent more time together as a result of containment measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, majority of the respondents represented by 30% disagreed with this statement while 26% strongly disagreed. The minority of the respondents at 9% agreed with this assertion while 15% agreed. Another 20% of the respondents were neutral regarding the statement.

The findings show that majority of the children were able to settle disagreements between themselves easily during the COVID-19 period just like they did during the pre-COVID-19 time. These findings agree with recent research by Shaligram (2021) which showed that older siblings were more attentive to their younger ones in efforts to settle issues between themselves and alleviate any suffering brought about by the pandemic just like before COVID-19. This means that siblings were able to settle disagreements between themselves when they spent more time together during the COVID-19 lockdown period just like they did before the measures were introduced.

The study variable on “in light of the circumstances, I think the length of time my children spent together was appropriate”, majority of the respondents at 29% agreed with the assertion, 24% strongly agreed, 16% disagreed while a minority at 10% strongly disagreed with the statement. Another 21% of the respondents remained neutral on the topic.

These findings indicate that majority of the siblings bonded well with one another during the COVID-19 pandemic when they spent more time together compared to pre-COVID-19 period. The findings augur with a study by Zhang et al. (2022) which established that though there were increased tensions between siblings as a result of spending more time together, there was, however, good interaction and acceptance between siblings during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

Regarding the study variable “My children felt secure with one another during COVID-19”, 33% being the majority of the respondents strongly agreed with the assertion while 30% agreed with the statement. A minority at 7% disagreed with the statement as did 11% of the respondents. A further 19% of the respondents remained neutral regarding the assertion. This show that majority of the respondents felt that their children felt secure when together during the COVID-19 period when containment measures were in place.

Key informants reported that they did not encounter instances of parents requiring professional intervention for siblings fighting or hurting one another in any way during COVID-19 period when they stayed together for prolonged time as a result of containment measures to curb the virus. One key informant a social worker stated that:

*“I did not encounter a case where a child or a parent requiring advice because of major or minor disagreements at home between children. Usually when siblings spend time together even for prolonged periods of time, they have differences but overall, they tend to bond well and look after one another.”*

These findings are supported by recent studies which have shown that siblings feel secure around one another (Zhang et al., 2022; Shaligram, 2021). This means that containment measures that resulted in siblings spending more time together did not affect the way siblings relate which each other. Siblings still felt secure around one another.

The study deduces that interactions between siblings were not affected by containment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya. Elements of interactions between siblings assessed in the study such as siblings expressing themselves freely to one another, siblings being open to talk about any elements of their relationship when upset about them, children settling their disagreements easily and children feeling secure with one another during the COVID-19 period compared to pre-COVID-19 period showed little effect on sibling interactions in families by COVID-19 pandemic containment measures.

### **Interactions in nuclear families between spouses**

Objective three of the study sought to explore the effects of containment measures on interactions between spouses. The findings are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Interactions in families between spouses**

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
I communicated more regularly with my wife/husband during COVID-19 compared to pre-COVID-19	99 (27%)	125 (34%)	55 (15%)	50 (13%)	41 (11%)	370 (100%)
The affection with my spouse satisfied my need for passionate physical contact (holding hands, hugging, kissing, touching, - other than when we were initiating or being intimate) during COVID-19 compared to pre-COVID-19.	102 (28%)	130 (35%)	38 (10%)	56 (15%)	44 (12%)	370 (100%)
One or both of us ended up very hurt or frustrated after a fight or disagreement during COVID-19 compared to pre-COVID-19.	32 (9%)	56 (15%)	55 (15%)	123 (33%)	104 (28%)	370 (100%)
I felt appreciated by my partner during COVID-19 compared to pre-COVID-19.	110 (30%)	129 (35%)	34 (9%)	64 (17%)	33 (9%)	370 (100%)

Key: Percentage (n=370)

Analysis of the findings in Table 3 concerning interactions in families between spouses shows that 34% of the respondents disagreed on the statement that they communicated more regularly with their spouses during COVID-19 compared to pre-COVID-19 period, 27% strongly disagreed, 13% agreed while a minority consisting of 11% strongly agreed with the assertion. Another 15% of the respondents indicated that they were neutral with regards to the statement. The findings indicate that communication between spouses in families was less frequent during the COVID-19 as the majority of the respondents indicated that they did not communicate with their spouses more regularly compared to pre-COVID-19. This is despite spending more time together as a result of the movement restrictions due to COVID-19 that resulted in spouses spending more time together at home.

Regarding social interactions within nuclear families in Ruiru sub-county, key informants who were social workers said that communication between spouses might not have been frequent. One key informant a social worker stated that:

*“It would appear that communication between spouses should improve when they spend more time together than when apart. This was supposed to be the case during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Ruiru and in Kenya generally. However, factors such as boredom, small or big disagreements might have played a role in limiting communication between spouses. I had a case where a wife was concerned with her husband’s behaviour of always looking at his phone and only talking to her occasionally.”*

Another key informant who was an area chief stated:

*“Personally, I was involved in solving cases to do with disputes between spouses. The issues would seem small to some spouses while they were actually big to their spouses. For example, there was a lady who came to complain about her husband sneaking out to go and drink at night and return home almost at mid night. She found this peculiar since before the onset of COVID-19, her husband never came home late. Remember there was a curfew imposed by the government at that time, so I had to come in and intervene.”*

Another key informant a chief stated that:

*“I have always been presented with cases of disagreements among couples in this area. I might not say that the cases went up during the COVID-19 period, but I can say that cases during that time were*

*under-reported. I later came to find out that some couples had separated during the COVID-19 period and only came to reconcile later after the pandemic.”*

These results agree with research by Karp et al. (2021) which found that many relationship aspects including communication between spouses were negatively affected during the COVID-19 period as a result of spouses spending more time together. According to the findings of this study, when spouses spend more time together, they discover both pleasant and unpleasant aspects about their partners. The unpleasant aspects cause communication breakdown between spouses if not well handled.

Analysis of the findings concerning spousal satisfaction with affection to guarantee physical contact such as holding hands, hugging, kissing, touching other than when initiating or being intimate during COVID-19 period when there were movement restrictions indicated that majority of the respondents at 35% disagreed with the assertion, 28% strongly disagreed, 15% agreed with a minority of the respondents at 12% strongly agreeing with the statement. A further 10% of the respondents were neutral regarding the statement.

Based on these findings, it is evident that majority of the respondents were of the opinion that there was lack of spousal satisfaction as a result of containment measures that made them to stay together for prolonged period of time during COVID19 pandemic period.

Key informants said that they encountered more marital issues during the COVID-19 pandemic period compared to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic period. The issues ranged from financial problems where there were unmet financial obligations, accusations of sexual dissatisfaction, infidelity, and a lack of understanding. One key informant a social worker was quoted as saying:

*“I have encountered a number of incidences of spouses saying that they have been denied their conjugal rights. Usually, it is one spouse complaining of being denied while the other complains of lacking motivation for intimacy.”*

Another key informant a social worker stated that:

*“Movement restrictions during COVID-19 pandemic should have been a perfect opportunity for couples to spend time together and be intimate. However, that was not always the case. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period, I dealt with several incidences of marital dissatisfaction. For example, I interacted with a lady client who came to seek professional advice on what she should do to improve her sexual appeal to her husband who seemed disinterested in her. She suspected that her husband was seeing someone else since he had also gone silent on her.”*

The findings agree with research by Isik and Kaya (2022) which established that marital interactions during the COVID-19 period deteriorated compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. According to the study, prolonged periods of spending time together between spouses resulted in increased arguments, fights, and general reduction in the quality of the relationships between spouses which resulted in poor interactions between spouses.

Findings on whether one or both of the spouses ended up very hurt or frustrated after a fight or disagreement revealed that majority of the respondents at 33% agreed that they end up getting hurt or frustrated after a fight, 28% of the respondents agreed with the statement, 15% disagreed whereas a minority of the respondents at 9% strongly disagreed with the assertion. An additional 15% of the respondents indicated that they were neutral on the matter. The results are an indication that majority of the respondents end up being frustrated after a fight.

Key informants who were social workers said that one of the major issues they had to deal with was marital frustration. One key informant said that:

*“I have encountered spousal frustrations over the years. Frustrations are usually due to many reasons such as promises not being fulfilled. During the COVID-19 period when there were movement restrictions, spouses had to spend more time together. I remember during that time a lady came to our office to seek counseling services. The issue was that her husband who usually works late was at home on a full-time basis and refused to use his financial savings to help the family cope with the situation. The husband simply said he could not touch his savings no matter what.”*

These findings are supported by a study done Karp et al. (2021) which showed that the quality of relationships between couples deteriorated during the COVID-19 period when lockdown measures were introduced forcing couples to spend more time together. The research indicated that couples got frustrated with each other after learning that their partners were different from how they had perceived them.

Analysis of the findings on whether respondents felt appreciated by their partners revealed that 35% of the respondents disagreed with this assertion, 30% strongly disagreed, 9% remained neutral, 17% agreed that they feel appreciated by their partners while a minority of respondents represented by 9% strongly agreed that they are appreciated by their partners. The findings reveal that most of the couples did not feel appreciated by their partners. Recent studies have shown that spouses who spent more time together as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic containment measures such as lockdowns felt less appreciated by their partners (Pieh, Rourke, Budimir a Probst, 2020; Gallegos, Zaring-Hinkle & Bray, 2022). According to the studies, one major reason why spouses felt less appreciated by their partners was that spouses found themselves spending time together at home instead of spending quality time together away from home like going on a vacation.

According to Buscho (2020), increased spousal interactions as a result of COVID-19 containment measures resulted in more divorces in China compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. Couples struggled to fulfill important interaction aspects such as communication, affection, problem solving, and appreciation (Buscho, 2020). Analysis of the study variables in the current study also shows that interactions between spouses were not good during the COVID-19 period when containment measures were in place compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. Analysis showed that important interaction aspects between spouses such as communication between spouses was not regularly done, there was not enough affection between spouses to warrant need for passionate physical contact like holding hands, hugging, kissing, or and touching other than when initiating for intimacy, problem solving was not good and spousal appreciation was also not good. Based on these findings, the study therefore deduces that the COVID-19 containment measures had a negative effect on the interaction between spouses in nuclear families in Ruiru sub-county within Kiambu County Kenya.

### **Intervention strategies**

The final objective sought to suggest interventional strategies of addressing the issues of social interactions that families faced.

### **Interventional Strategies on Interaction between Parents and Children**

The study sought to find out from the respondents’ appropriate intervention strategies to address issues of interaction between parents and children. The findings are displayed on Table 4.

**Table 4: Interventional strategies on interaction between parents and children**

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Parents need to establish good rapport with their children at all times	370	100
Parents or children should engage the authorities in dealing with difficult family issues	82	22
Government should establish family counseling services in Ruiru sub-county	352	95
Government should encourage families to seek professional help to deal with issues between parents and children	300	81

Key: Percentage (n=370)

Analysis of results on Table 4 shows that 100% of the respondents were of the opinion that parents need to establish good rapport with their children at all times. Respondents said that if parents establish good relationships with their children, issues such as having a favourite child or parent or not feeling free to engage certain family members can be avoided, and healthy interactions established.

Further, 22% of the respondents were of the opinion that parents or children should engage authorities such as area chiefs and the police in resolving family issues and disputes of high magnitude such as fights, quarrels and not spousal failure to meet family needs. The respondents further suggested that although authorities should be involved, they should be the last resort after all avenues to solve the issues within the family have failed.

Another 95% of the respondents were of the opinion that the government should establish family counseling services in Ruiru Sub - County. The respondents said that currently, most family counseling services are run by private individuals who charge high counseling fees. Therefore, there is need for the government to establish counseling services and employ competent professionals to provide counseling services to families at affordable fees.

One key informant, a social worker stated that:

*“Family counseling services are not well established in Ruiru and in Kenya by extension. I would say that the government should do more in establishing family counseling services since families are the foundation of any society. A dysfunctional family unit will result in the whole society breaking down. There are so many professionals that the government has trained in this field, but they have not been utilized well.”*

Further, 81% of the respondents suggested that the government should encourage families to seek professional help to deal with issues between parents and children. One respondent suggested that the government should do so through local administrators such as assistant chiefs, chiefs and even leaders of *Nyumba kumi* (Community policing leaders). One other respondent suggested that the government should leverage the popularity of mass media to sensitize families on the importance of seeking professional help to deal with family issues.

### **Interventional Strategies on Interaction between Siblings**

The study sought from respondents the best intervention strategies on interaction between siblings. Results are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5: Interventional strategies on interaction siblings**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Family education should be introduced in schools and places of worship	355	96
Parents should take control in improving relationships between siblings	362	98

Key: Percentage (n=370)

Based on the results on Table 5, 96% of the respondents suggested that there is a need to introduce family education in schools and places of worship. One respondent further suggested that family education should be made a mandatory and examinable subject in school. This would help always create and foster healthy relationships between siblings. One respondent said that although parents have a huge role to play as far as relationships between siblings’ relationships are concerned, if such education is introduced in schools, it will raise awareness on the importance of upholding family values such as establishing healthy relationships between siblings.

These suggestions are consistent with a recent study by Long (2015) on the importance of including ideals of family education in the school curriculum such as communication, compassion and honesty. The study noted that relationships between siblings can break down because of poor parenting and may thus require the intervention of government to create healthy families. The intervention can come through introduction of family education in the school curriculum.

Further, 98% of the respondents were of the view that parents should take control in improving relationships between siblings. With regards to this during discussions with key informants who were area chiefs, one chief stated that:

*“Parents are the primary care providers to their children. But again, it is possible for parents to miss the point when they display open bias like liking some children while disliking others. This can create animosity between children. I have seen this happen and I could urge parents to treat their children equally.”*

### **Interventional Strategies on Interaction between Spouses**

The study sought to find from respondents the best intervention strategies on interaction between spouses. Results are as shown on Table 6.

**Table 6: Interventional strategies on interaction between spouses**

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
There is need for government to carry out marital assessment to inform policy formulation	345	93
Spouses should regularly seek professional help from marriage and relationships therapies	297	80
Government should encourage and support establishment of marriage and relationship therapy centres	310	84

Key: Percentage (n=370)

Based on the results in Table 6, 93% of the respondents were of the view that the government should carry out marital assessment to inform policy formulation. During discussions with key informants, one key informant stated that:

*“There is need for the government to carry out marital assessment with the intention to inform policy formulation. For instance, that can inform the government to establish marital counseling centres across Ruiru sub-county or across the country to deal with marital issues.”*

Another key informant a social worker said:

*“Communication both verbal and non-verbal between spouses is an important part of their relationship. One should not assume even the smallest aspect that requires to be communicated otherwise it can have the potential to become a big issue. The government also has a role to play in ensuring good relationship in marriages.”*

This assumption is supported by the theoretical underpinning of family system theory which states that “families can examine their own processes and set deliberate goals”. Based on this theoretical underpinning, change can occur when a family system recognizes that a specific family pattern is undesirable and devises new procedures that further the family's objectives. Going by this underpinning, there is need for the government to do marital assessment in Ruiru Sub- County to inform its policy formulation.

Further, 80% of the respondents were of the opinion that there is need for spouses to regularly seek for professional help from marriage and relationship therapists. Regarding this intervention, one key informant a social worker said that:



*“Marriage and relationship therapy is as important as a medical check-up. Spouses tend to ignore such services perhaps for fear of looking weak in the case of men or because of the high fees that are charged.”*

Another key informant a social worker stated that:

*“Our society has not embraced professional marriage and relationship therapy. Currently, there is a big gap. I think there is a need to popularize such services because families have started to break down at an alarming speed. Containment measures that resulted in spouses spending more time together during Covid-19 exposed some family interaction issues that need to be fixed.”*

Further, 84% of the respondents indicated that the government should encourage and support the establishment of marriage and relationship centres in Ruiru Sub- County. One respondent said that the establishment of such centres by the government would encourage spouses to seek marital counsel. One key informant an area chief stated that:

*“Marriage and relationship counseling centres exist in Ruiru Sub- County. However, one would say that they are not enough and perhaps not close to people. The issue of high fee charged by marital therapists would also be an issue for those wishing to get such services.”*

The Kenyan government established a National Policy on Family Promotion and Protection (2019) with the aim to encourage healthy marriages. The policy sought to encourage and promote dispute resolution mechanisms that keep spouses together. However, much has not been done to ensure the identification and implementation of such mechanisms.

This study concludes that there are a number of appropriate intervention strategies that can improve social interactions within families in Ruiru sub-County, Kiambu County Kenya. To improve interaction between parents and children, there is need for parents to establish good rapport with their children at all times, the government should establish family counseling services in Ruiru sub-county and encourage families to seek professional help to deal with issues between parents and children. To improve interactions between siblings and siblings, the government should introduce family education in schools and and encourage the introduction of the same in places of worship.

Also, parents should take control in improving relationships between siblings. To improve interactions between spouses, the government needs to carry out marital assessment to inform policy formulation and encourage and support establishment of marriage and relationship therapy centres across Ruiru sub-County. There is also need for spouses to regularly seek professional help from marriage and relationships therapists.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study concludes that containment measures due to COVID-19 pandemic generally had negative effects on social interactions within families in Ruiru sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya. The findings found that containment measures which included restriction of movements during COVID-19 that forced families to spend more time together than it was usual affected the interaction between parents and their children. Family interaction aspects such as freedom to engage any member of the family, unbiased treatment, harmonious co-existence and amicable resolution of conflicts were not positive.

The study found that containment measures as a result of COVID-19 had insignificant effect on interactions between siblings. Interaction aspects between siblings assessed in the study such as siblings expressing themselves freely to one another, siblings being open to talk about any elements of their relationship when upset about them, children settling their disagreements easily and children feeling secure with one another were insignificantly affected by the containment measures.

The study established that the COVID-19 containment measures had a negative effect on the interaction between spouses in nuclear families in Ruiru sub-county. There was negative change in spousal interaction aspects such as communication, affection, problem solving and spousal appreciation as a result of the containment measures.

The study found that interventional strategies to counter issues of social interactions within families were inadequate. Some of the interventional strategies suggested by the study include parents establishing good rapport with their children, government establishing family counseling services in Ruiru sub-county, introduction of family education in schools and places of worship, need for government to carry out marital assessment to inform policy formulation and establishment of marital therapy centres by the government.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are necessary to address the issue of negative social interaction between family members in the face of another calamity like COVID-19 pandemic that forced families to spend more time together:

- The study recommends that since family is the building block of the society, the government needs to carry out a critical assessment and measurement of marital, parent-to-child and sibling-to-sibling interactions to inform future policy formulation regarding social interaction in families.
- The study found that there are inadequate family intervention strategies from the government and other stakeholders and therefore recommends that the government and non-governmental organizations should put in place intervention measures such as family counseling services that address interaction issues within families that might require professional intervention such as estranged relationships between spouses, parents and children or siblings.
- The study also recommends that the government should develop and introduce family education as a subject in the school curriculum as a way of instilling family values in learning from an early age.
- The study also recommends more funding to research institutions to enable them research more effectively on pandemics so that they can come up with better mitigation measures to address social interactions within families in case of other similar global pandemics that are likely to happen in the future.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The study recommended that further research be done on:

- Effects of COVID-19 containment measures on family interactions in other types of families apart from the nuclear families since the containment measures affected interactions in other family set-ups.
- Family policies like the National Policy on Family Promotion and Protection policy (2019) need to be well effected in promoting healthy social interactions in families.

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