



Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on Black Working Mothers: Education and Mental Health while Continuing their Education

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Abstract

This qualitative grounded theory study examines the impact of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on Black working mothers, with particular attention to the intersection of employment, childcare responsibilities, mental health, and educational aspirations. Although existing scholarship has documented the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on marginalized populations, limited research has explored how these intersecting domains collectively shape Black working mothers lived experiences and decision-making processes.

Drawing on grounded theory methodology, this study investigates how participants navigated intensified role strain during the pandemic, such as workplace expectations, childcare disruptions, and educational pursuits converged. Findings suggest that COVID-19 exacerbated preexisting structural inequities, including systemic barriers within corporate environments and persistent underrepresentation in leadership roles. Participants also described the influence of the Strong Black Woman schema, which contributed to emotional suppression and heightened psychological burden.

The pandemic further complicated work–life integration, particularly as school closures and shifting childcare demands increased cognitive and emotional labor. These compounded pressures contributed to decision-making fatigue and negatively affected participants’ mental well-being, often influencing their capacity to initiate or persist in educational advancement.

This study contributes to the literature by advancing a conceptual understanding of how intersecting structural and psychosocial factors shape Black working mothers’ experiences during crisis conditions. Implications highlight the need for targeted institutional policies and support systems that address mental health, workplace equity, and access to flexible educational pathways. By centering the voices of Black working mothers, this research informs more equitable strategies to support their academic and professional trajectories in post-pandemic contexts.

Keywords: Black working mothers, COVID-19 pandemic, Grounded theory, Mental health, Educational attainment

Introduction

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has profoundly disrupted social, economic, and educational systems, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations. Among those most impacted are Black working mothers, who navigate the intersecting demands of employment, caregiving, and personal advancement within systems shaped by longstanding structural inequities. Although emerging scholarship has examined the general effects of the pandemic on women and marginalized groups, the compounded experiences of Black working mothers, particularly in relation to continuing education and mental well-being, remain insufficiently theorized.

Existing literature has documented how COVID-19 intensified workplace instability, childcare disruptions, and psychological strain (Fulweiler et al., 2021; Thompson, 2022). For Black women, these challenges are further compounded by systemic barriers in professional environments, including underrepresentation in leadership, racialized gender stereotypes, and pressures associated with the Strong Black Woman schema. These factors collectively contribute to heightened role strain and emotional labor, often requiring Black working mothers to navigate competing expectations with limited institutional support. While prior research has explored these domains independently, workplace inequities, mental health outcomes, and caregiving burdens, there remains a critical gap in understanding how these intersecting pressures influence Black working mothers' ability to initiate, persist in, or suspend their educational pursuits during the pandemic.

The central research problem, therefore, lies in the absence of an integrated, process-oriented understanding of how Black working mothers make decisions regarding continuing education amid the compounded demands of COVID-19. Specifically, little is known about workplace expectations, childcare responsibilities, and mental health challenges converge to shape educational trajectories during periods of crisis. Addressing this gap is essential, as educational attainment remains a key mechanism for economic mobility and professional advancement, particularly for populations historically excluded from equitable opportunities.

Guided by a grounded theory approach, this study seeks to generate a conceptual framework that explains how Black working mothers navigate these intersecting challenges and

make meaning of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. By centering their voices, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the structural and psychosocial factors influencing educational continuance and mental well-being. The findings have implications for the development of responsive institutional policies and support systems designed to promote equity, persistence, and holistic well-being among Black working mothers in post-pandemic contexts.

Literature Review

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema and the Angry Black Woman (ABW) stereotype extend beyond social perception and function as mechanisms that directly shape Black working mothers' psychological well-being and educational persistence. The SBW schema, while often framed as resilience, reinforces expectations of emotional suppression, self-reliance, and endurance in the face of adversity, limiting help-seeking behaviors and access to support systems (Watson-Singleton, 2017; Davis & Jones, 2021). Concurrently, the ABW stereotype perpetuates the mischaracterization of Black women's assertiveness as hostility, contributing to self-silencing and heightened vigilance in professional and academic spaces (Motro et al., 2022; Avery et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these intersecting stereotypes intensified role strain, as Black working mothers navigated increased workplace demands, childcare disruptions, and academic responsibilities. The internalization of these stereotypes contributes to psychological distress, including anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and decision-making fatigue, which in turn undermines their capacity to initiate or sustain engagement in educational pursuits. In this way, stereotype-driven expectations do not merely influence perception but operate as structural and psychosocial barriers that constrain both mental health outcomes and educational continuance for Black working mothers during periods of crisis

Corporate Environment and the Glass Cliff

Given the historical context of racialized and gendered stereotypes, including the Strong Black Woman persona, Black women continue to encounter significant barriers within corporate environments that limit their advancement and sense of belonging. These barriers often manifest in restricted opportunities for authentic expression, with 42% of Black women reporting they do not feel comfortable sharing perspectives on racial inequity and 22% indicating they withhold opinions on sociopolitical issues that directly affect them (Caprino, 2021). As a result, many engage in code-switching to navigate predominantly White professional spaces, altering

communication styles and behaviors to align with dominant cultural norms (McCluney et al., 2021). While adaptive, these strategies require substantial cognitive and emotional labor, which can contribute to fatigue and diminished psychological well-being.

These workplace dynamics are further complicated by structural barriers to advancement, including the persistence of the glass ceiling and, more specifically for Black women, the *glass cliff phenomenon*. The glass cliff refers to the tendency for women and people of color to be placed in leadership roles during periods of organizational instability, where the likelihood of failure is heightened (Ellis, 2022). For Black women, such opportunities are often framed as progress but may instead reflect symbolic efforts toward diversity rather than substantive inclusion. These roles frequently lack adequate institutional support, increasing pressure to perform under precarious conditions and exposing individuals to heightened scrutiny and risk (Oaks, 2022).

Importantly, the implications of the glass cliff extend beyond workplace experiences and directly intersect with Black working mothers' educational trajectories during the COVID-19 pandemic. As participants navigated increased professional expectations, often in unstable or high-pressure roles, they simultaneously managed intensified caregiving responsibilities and, in many cases, ongoing educational pursuits. The additional cognitive, emotional, and temporal demands associated with navigating precarious leadership or workplace environments reduced the capacity to engage in or persist with educational activities. Moreover, the stress associated with proving competence in these roles, particularly within environments shaped by bias and limited support, contributed to decision-making fatigue and psychological strain.

Thus, the glass cliff operates not only as a workplace phenomenon but also as a structural condition that constrains Black working mothers' ability to balance professional advancement with educational continuation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these compounded pressures heightened the difficulty of sustaining academic engagement, illustrating how workplace inequities are directly linked to disruptions in educational persistence. By situating the glass cliff within the broader context of intersecting responsibilities, this study highlights how corporate dynamics function as critical, yet often overlooked, factors influencing Black working mothers' educational decision-making and mental well-being.

Confidence and Isolation

Within corporate environments shaped by intersecting forces of racism, sexism, and enduring stereotypes such as the *Strong Black Woman* persona, Black women often encounter

structural and interpersonal barriers that complicate their advancement and sense of belonging. These pressures contribute to diminished psychological safety, as evidenced by findings that 42% of Black women feel unable to voice concerns about racial inequity and 22% feel compelled to withhold perspectives on current events that directly affect them (Caprino, 2021). This constrained self-expression undermines access to authentic support systems and limits opportunities to thrive professionally. Consequently, many Black women engage in code-switching, adapting language, behavior, and presentation to align with dominant workplace norms, as a strategy for navigating predominantly White corporate spaces (McCluney et al., 2021; Kracht & Klein, 2014). This constant negotiation of identity contributes to what has been described as *ivory tower isolation*, wherein Black women experience both hypervisibility and marginalization simultaneously (Henry & Glenn, 2009).

These dynamics are further compounded by persistent assumptions of incompetence, requiring Black women to continually demonstrate their qualifications and legitimacy in environments where they are often underrepresented (Rosser-Mims, 2010). Such conditions necessitate the creation of individualized pathways to leadership, frequently without equitable mentorship or institutional support. While the concept of the *glass ceiling* broadly captures barriers to advancement for women and minorities, Black women more specifically encounter the *glass cliff*, wherein they are elevated into leadership roles during periods of organizational instability or as symbolic gestures of diversity (Lockert, 2022; Ellis, 2022). Although recent sociopolitical pressures, particularly following the murder of George Floyd, have prompted organizations to increase visible diversity, these appointments are not always accompanied by the structural support necessary for success (Stevens, 2020). As a result, Black women may enter high-stakes roles without adequate preparation or resources, exposing them to heightened scrutiny and risk of failure (Oaks, 2022). Collectively, these conditions reinforce cycles of isolation and erode confidence, even among highly capable individuals, as they navigate workplaces that often fail to fully recognize or sustain their contributions.

Gendered Division of Labor

Mothers bear more significant household and childcare responsibilities than fathers. They spend more hours with children and manage more household tasks, increasing stress (Cheng et al., 2021). Mothers often handle childcare and household duties in two-parent households, while fathers focus on basics like feeding and activities (Raley et al., 2012).

Single mothers juggle work, childcare, and household management alone (Schoppe-Sullivan, 2017).

Motherhood, Work-Life Balance, and Educational Decision-Making

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly reshaped the boundaries between work and home life, intensifying the demands placed on working mothers. As remote work became widespread, mothers were expected to maintain full professional productivity while simultaneously assuming expanded caregiving responsibilities within the home. Work–life balance, typically defined as the ability to effectively manage professional and personal roles without psychological strain (Abioror et al., 2018; Lazar et al., 2010), became increasingly difficult to achieve under these conditions. For Black working mothers, this challenge was further compounded by systemic inequities, including racism, sexism, and class-based barriers, which required them to exert additional effort to achieve comparable outcomes to their White counterparts (Wingfield, 2021).

Motherhood responsibilities intensified during the pandemic, as many women assumed additional roles as educators, caregivers, and emotional supports for their children due to school closures and reduced access to external support systems. This convergence of responsibilities created persistent role conflict, wherein mothers were forced to navigate competing expectations between professional obligations and caregiving duties. Research indicates that in dual-income households, mothers disproportionately assumed domestic responsibilities, often at the expense of their professional and personal development (Kantamneni, 2020). These dynamics contributed to heightened stress, anxiety, and burnout, particularly among mothers of school-aged children.

Critically, these compounded pressures directly influenced decisions related to continuing education. For Black working mothers, the pursuit of further education during COVID-19 was not solely an academic decision but a negotiated outcome shaped by competing demands on time, energy, and psychological capacity. The need to prioritize immediate family responsibilities and maintain employment stability often resulted in the postponement, reduction, or discontinuation of educational pursuits. Additionally, the cognitive and emotional load associated with managing multiple roles contributed to decision-making fatigue, reducing the capacity to engage in long-term planning and sustained academic effort.

At the same time, education remained a critical pathway for career advancement and economic mobility. This created a paradox in which Black working mothers recognized the importance of continuing education but faced structural and situational barriers that constrained

their ability to do so. Feelings of guilt associated with allocating time to academic work, coupled with exhaustion and limited support systems, further complicated these decisions. Consequently, educational persistence during the pandemic was not simply a matter of motivation or aspiration but was deeply embedded within the broader context of role strain, mental health, and systemic inequities.

By explicitly linking motherhood and work–life balance to educational decision-making, this study highlights how Black working mothers’ choices regarding continuing education are shaped by intersecting personal, professional, and structural factors. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing institutional supports that acknowledge the realities of working mothers and promote equitable access to educational advancement during periods of crisis.

The preceding discussion underscores that Black working mothers’ educational decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be disentangled from the broader context of intensified caregiving demands, constrained work–life balance, and systemic inequities. These intersecting pressures highlight the need for an approach that moves beyond surface-level description to examine the underlying processes through which decisions are negotiated and sustained over time. In particular, understanding how Black working mothers interpret, respond to, and manage competing role expectations requires a methodological framework capable of capturing both lived experience and the dynamic construction of meaning. Therefore, the following section outlines the qualitative grounded theory design employed in this study, which is well-suited to generating an explanatory model of how Black working mothers navigate the complex interplay of career responsibilities, childcare, mental health, and educational pursuits during a period of unprecedented disruption.

Method

This study employed a qualitative grounded theory design to examine how Black working mothers navigated the intersection of career responsibilities, childcare demands, mental health, and educational pursuits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative methods were appropriate given the study’s focus on understanding participants’ lived experiences and the processes through which they made meaning of competing role demands. This study explored the following research questions:

1. How do Black working mothers describe their experiences balancing career

- responsibilities, childcare, and educational pursuits during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What barriers and challenges do Black working mothers encounter when attempting to continue their education while managing professional and family responsibilities?
 3. How do Black working mothers perceive the role of mental health and decision-making fatigue in shaping their educational and career-related decisions?
 4. What types of resources and support systems do Black working mothers identify as necessary to sustain their mental well-being and educational persistence?

Population and Sample Description

The participants were drawn from a population of working mothers who categorized themselves as Black or African American. These individuals lived in Washington, D.C., Maryland, or Virginia (DMV). Participants worked either full or part-time, with no limitations on age. Following the interviews, participants were grouped based on the age of their children: newborn to 5 years old, 6 to 12 years old, and 13 to 17 years old. Depending on individual comfort levels, data were collected either virtually or in person. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire to determine eligibility for the study.

Data Collection and Instrumentation of Data

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group with Black working mothers residing in the Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia (DMV) area. Participants were purposefully selected from an accessible population to ensure relevance to the research problem. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai, and imported into NVivo for systematic analysis. The interviews began with open-ended questions about the participants' feelings regarding COVID-19 and how the pandemic had impacted them as working mothers. More focused questions followed to obtain detailed data on the impact of mental health. The interviews concluded with additional open-ended questions to collect further information about Black working mothers and how they could continue their higher education.

Interviews were conducted in person and through WebEx and Teams platforms. The interviews were recorded electronically. The focus group was recorded in person via Zoom using

a computer positioned to capture the group. The researcher utilized a community library recreation room at the Connie Morella (Bethesda) Library, where the focus group was held. No interviews were completed without confirmation of written and verbal informed consent. Participants were recruited through personal and academic networks accessible to the researcher. Responses were derived from participants' firsthand experiences. NVivo was utilized to analyze the data from the interviews. NVivo was a qualitative data analysis software program.

Data Analysis

Consistent with grounded theory methodology, data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection and followed an iterative coding process. During open coding, transcripts were examined line-by-line to identify discrete concepts related to participants' experiences, including role strain, mental health challenges, and educational decision-making. These initial codes remained closely aligned with participants' language to preserve meaning and context.

In the second phase, axial coding was used to examine relationships among codes by grouping them into broader categories. For example, codes related to exhaustion, emotional overwhelm, and competing responsibilities were organized under higher-order categories such as *burnout* and *role conflict*. Similarly, codes reflecting delayed enrollment, reduced course loads, or withdrawal from programs were grouped under *educational persistence and disruption*.

Finally, through selective coding, core themes were developed by integrating and refining these categories into a cohesive explanatory framework. This process allowed the researcher to identify central phenomena and the conditions influencing them, including the interplay between workplace expectations, childcare responsibilities, and mental health. The resulting themes presented directly emerged from this systematic coding process and reflect patterned responses across participants' narratives.

To enhance analytic rigor, the researcher maintained an audit trail of coding decisions and engaged in constant comparison throughout the analysis, ensuring that themes were grounded in the data rather than imposed a priori. This iterative approach strengthened the alignment between the study's methodological framework and the findings, demonstrating how participants' experiences informed the development of the final thematic structure.

Findings

The findings presented in this section are organized to reflect the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the data through the grounded theory coding process. To enhance

clarity and guide the reader, results are grouped into overarching thematic categories, including individual resources, mental health experiences, and the intersection of these factors with participants' educational and professional responsibilities. Within each category, subthemes are introduced and supported by representative participant excerpts to illustrate the depth and nuance of lived experiences. This structure allows for a systematic presentation of findings, demonstrating how initial codes developed through open coding were refined into broader categories during axial coding and ultimately integrated into cohesive themes through selective coding. By organizing the data in this manner, the section provides a clear and coherent framework for understanding the patterns that emerged across participants' narratives.

Individual Resources Codes

In qualitative research, codes represent discrete labels assigned to segments of data that capture key ideas, concepts, or patterns within participants' responses. During the initial phase of analysis, open coding was used to identify these units of meaning directly from the data, often remaining closely aligned with participants' language. As analysis progressed, these codes were examined for relationships and grouped into broader categories through axial coding, allowing for the identification of patterns across participants. Ultimately, codes served as the foundational building blocks for theme development, enabling the researcher to systematically organize and interpret participants' experiences within the grounded theory framework.

Resources

Every participant had different resources they stated would have been helpful to them or the community. One of the main themes among participants is having a community they could lean on during hard times. One of the participants shared her need for other Black women to support her by stating the following:

‘Honestly, it's being in relationships with other black women. I also have friends who are not black. But when the white woman talks to me about parenting her white son, it's a part of that conversation that we can't have, right? Because you're not nervous when your son goes out into the world. I'm nervous. And so that anxiety was like, how am I going to take this little bit of time that I have and focus on me when I'm raising black children? And so, being in a relationship with black women is what we do, right? It's innate. It's in our genes. We've taken control of the word strong, understand the negative connotation, and go with that because it

doesn't mean I'm supposed to exhaust myself. But you have that conversation with other Black mothers'. (Shuri).

Employment Resources

Along with having support from their community and having mental health services, participants stated that having support from their employer helped them succeed during COVID-19. Having employers set aside funds that can aid employees in obtaining certifications or degrees helps them be motivated to return to education.

'About all the certifications, I have utilized funding. It's been progressively increased to where my career is going. And because they pay for it, that builds everybody. So, I'm kind of like the poster child. I tell people all the time who, like know me certifications, you can use your tuition assistance for the study materials a lot, you can do that. If you need to take a prep course, you can use it for that as well. I make sure everyone knows about it and utilizes it. Right? Like, what's your problem? Get on that. Because I recognize that as one of the benefits'. (KiKi).

Schedules and Time Blocking

To keep up with the work schedules, their children's schedules, and other personal activities, they utilize different schedules and charts to manage all their families' activities.

'I live by the calendar, and I've been doing that since I had children. So, I still utilize the calendar, but I've included checklists to do. Okay, because everything comes together and starts coming together. And it's just like a whirlwind instead of being uncontrollable. Do a checklist, and I check it off every time I get something done'. (Lisa)

With scheduling and time blocking, Simone shared that sometimes it is essential to understand what works best for you and your family. She shared that there are times when you must adjust to getting the best results and keep your household manageable: 'Yes, I do a lot of time blocking. I did then, and I still use that tool now with each of them. Honestly, I would tell other moms that I mentor that if something doesn't work for you, throw it in the trash and try something else'. (Simone)

Mental Health Codes

The mental health codes represent themes that capture the psychological and emotional experiences of Black working mothers as they navigated the compounded demands of work,

caregiving, and educational pursuits during the COVID-19 pandemic. These codes reflect how prolonged stress, role overload, and limited opportunities for recovery manifested in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, including decision-making fatigue, memory disruption, and heightened states of anxiety, overstimulation, and exhaustion. Collectively, these themes illustrate the ways in which mental health challenges were not isolated experiences but were deeply embedded within participants' daily responsibilities, ultimately influencing their capacity to cope, make decisions, and persist in their academic and professional endeavors.

Decision Making Fatigue

Decision-making fatigue among Black working mothers is closely linked to the cumulative effects of burnout, anxiety, and limited opportunities for self-care. Prolonged exposure to unmitigated stress, characterized by exhaustion, difficulty concentrating, and chronic overwhelm, reduces cognitive and emotional capacity, making even routine decisions increasingly taxing (Casarella, 2022; World Health Organization, 2019). This fatigue is intensified by cultural expectations such as the *Superwoman Schema* and *Strong Black Woman Syndrome*, which often discourage help-seeking and require Black women to manage multiple responsibilities independently (Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Nelson et al., 2016). Elevated rates of anxiety and depression further impair focus and increase emotional strain, limiting the psychological bandwidth needed for sustained decision-making (Hamm, 2014; Watson & Hunter, 2015). At the same time, although self-care is recognized as essential for maintaining physical, mental, and emotional well-being, many Black women lack the time and resources to engage in consistent restorative practices (Atkins-Jackson et al., 2019; Lawler, 2023). As a result, decision-making fatigue emerges not simply as an individual challenge but because of intersecting structural, emotional, and health-related pressures, ultimately diminishing Black working mothers' ability to make intentional, long-term decisions related to their education and career advancement. Over seventeen vignettes were assigned to this code, making it selective. Several participants shared how they were the sole decision-makers for their homes, even in a two-parent household.

'I think my family does need to step up. And again, you know, fill in the gaps. But, you know, the woman also must have the backbone to say, hey, this is what I need. We know that doesn't necessarily mean you'll get what you're asking for. But you can say, hey, I need the house quiet from this time, but this time, I need not be distracted from this time to this time

when I have my headphones in don't bother me when I'm trying to study or memorize something don't do that kind of thing'. (Zanessa).

Memory Loss

During the group session, participants shared how having decision- making fatigue has led to memory loss. 'I 100% think that is true. And it's funny that you ask that because I was going to say, you know a couple of times, but we've been talking more like I think it was 2020 or you know what I mean? Right? Like, a year, right? Yeah. know what happened, and I know what happened between 2020 and (20)22. It gets a little fuzzy, right? Um, and one of the things I also wonder is, like, you know, when we're children, how traumatic things would happen, and we would forget. Right, I almost wonder if it's like, stress does trauma work like that our body can compartmentalize that. You know, and store in part of the brain, and a lot of times you, you know, you hear about people blocking out triggers, locking out stress, which triggers the same parts of the brain neurologically. But you remember, the body remembers how the stress makes you feel'. (Jane)

'No, I experienced that. And it wasn't just like, oh, I came into this room. I can't remember. I'm also in here for that feeling of what I did today. You know, or like you're losing time, like you. I said, my girlfriend the other day I know it's not six o'clock. Because what did I do'? (Charlotte)

'What happened before what we call in my house the evening hustle? What went on before that? And I think it's like that. That thing when you're pregnant, and you're like, You got so much going on hormones flaring you like I don't remember anything. But I believe that this particular time period put us in a space where, as the others were saying, what happened in 2021 went on one year was that because oftentimes people, I don't know if this happened to you all, but people are like, oh no, that was just in 2020. I'm like, what are you talking about? What do you mean that was just in 2020? Like, that couldn't have been four years ago. I forget everything because there are so many things. And my kids know if they don't even bother to tell me that morning. This goes for the college kids, and yeah'. (Simone)

Anxiety, Overstimulation, and Exhaustion

Anxiety, overstimulation, and exhaustion emerged as a prominent and interconnected subtheme across participant narratives, with twelve vignettes illustrating the cumulative impact of these experiences. Participants described persistent cognitive strain resulting from constant

interruptions, competing demands, and the inability to maintain sustained focus. For example, one participant explained how disruptions significantly impaired her ability to regain concentration, leading to increased anxiety and a sense of falling behind. These experiences were compounded by the simultaneous management of professional responsibilities, childcare, and educational pursuits, which created an environment of continuous mental engagement without adequate recovery.

Participants also reported heightened sensory and emotional overload, particularly within the home environment where work, school, and family responsibilities converged. This overstimulation was often intensified by children's needs for attention and physical proximity, requiring participants to regulate their own emotional responses while supporting others. As a result, many described a persistent state of fatigue, characterized not only by physical exhaustion but also by emotional depletion. Several participants articulated moments of overwhelm in which the accumulation of responsibilities became unmanageable, leading to withdrawal, frustration, or emotional distress.

Importantly, these findings demonstrate that anxiety, overstimulation, and exhaustion were not isolated experiences but mutually reinforcing conditions that contributed to broader mental health challenges and diminished capacity for sustained productivity. The convergence of these factors highlights the intensity of participants' lived experiences during COVID-19 and underscores their role in shaping decision-making processes, particularly in relation to educational persistence and overall well-being.

‘Because of my ADHD, there's that dysfunction of me if I'm in flow and you distract me; it could take me an hour to get back in flow again, right, because my brain just needs to be in the environment it needs to be conducive to me getting back in flow when I get distracted. Now I'm anxious because I got distracted just because I'm falling behind, and I have been calming all those things down to get back into writing’. (Zanessa)

She also continued to say more about how all life's requirements exhausted her. ‘I was just exhausted, honestly, just exhausted because I was trying to be here, there, and everything tried to make sure that my interest, I was able to have my outlets for that, as well as the children having their outlets for their interests, as well. It became overwhelming at times’. (Zanessa)

One participant also shared how with her children being home during COVID-19 she realized a trait about their personality that wasn't so evident before and how that impacted how she had to manage herself.

'I mean, they were clinging, to begin with, but I mean, the thing Ultra super-duper during the midst of which is hard for me because I'm the empath, so I absorb everything. And I think both have a love language of physical touch. And I'm just wondering, oh, my god, we're overstimulated. Completely overstimulated. stimulated. So, how are you able to manage that on your own? No, trying not to, like, I guess, lash out at them because that's just how your kids love'. (KiKi).

Individual and Mental Health Dependent Codes

The individual and mental health dependent codes represent themes that emerged at the intersection of personal resources and psychological well-being, highlighting how these factors are not experienced independently but are deeply interconnected. These codes capture the ways in which access to supports, such as culturally competent mental health services and childcare, directly influenced participants' ability to manage stress, maintain emotional stability, and persist in their educational and professional pursuits. Rather than functioning as isolated categories, these themes illustrate how individual resources both shape and are shaped by mental health experiences, ultimately impacting decision-making, coping strategies, and overall capacity to navigate competing life demands.

Access to Culturally Competent Mental Health Support

One of the most salient themes emerging from the data was the need for access to culturally competent mental health resources, particularly Black therapists. This theme was identified in over 80% of participant responses and was supported by more than ten open codes, indicating its centrality to participants lived experiences. Participants consistently emphasized that working with a Black therapist reduced the need to contextualize or justify their experiences related to race, gender, and systemic inequities, thereby allowing for more effective emotional processing.

As one participant explained, 'I did not want to have to provide a history lesson... that was an extra layer that I did not feel like dealing with' (KiKi), highlighting the additional cognitive and emotional labor required when cultural understanding is absent. Similarly, another participant noted the importance of being able to 'say what I need to say... for cultural competence' (Zanessa), reinforcing the role of shared lived or cultural understanding in facilitating meaningful therapeutic

engagement.

Relationship to Mental Health and Coping

The need for culturally aligned mental health support is directly tied to the broader mental health challenges experienced by Black working mothers during COVID-19. Participants described heightened levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, and constant vigilance as they navigated workplace demands, caregiving responsibilities, and pandemic-related uncertainties. These findings are consistent with existing literature indicating that Black women experience elevated psychosocial stress due to intersecting racial and gender-based inequities (Kalinowski et al., 2022).

Without adequate mental health support, participants reported difficulty managing these stressors, which contributed to maladaptive coping, burnout, and feelings of being overwhelmed. Even when participants engaged in coping strategies such as journaling or meditation, these approaches were often insufficient to address the cumulative and chronic nature of their stress.

Childcare. The open code *childcare* encompassed over fourteen distinct code vignettes. All participants mentioned childcare because it is the main topic of this dissertation. Each participant talked not just about their own childcare but also about how they know of its importance to Black working moms as well. The need for childcare assistance during COVID-19 was imperative to each Black working mother. The participants also shared how they need to have care in different formats for children.

‘Um, so it's crazy. I mean, this is childcare in general, but the cost of childcare is outrageous. And I think what would be helpful is more obviously affordable options, but still high quality, right. So, my good friend I mentioned earlier, has a toddler and is pregnant again. She had her toddler start daycare during COVID and she was very, very nervous about it. And I think what would be helpful is more obviously affordable options, but still high quality, right?’ (Olivia)

They even mention the need for 24-hour daycare by a few participants as well.

‘Um, back in the day, here in {where they live}, they used to have 24-hour daycares. Um, and there were a few in the city one time and I believe there's only one right now. Operates late night, things like that for working moms, moms in schools, things like that. We had a network of people who would come and help us’. (Zanessa)

Another participant suggested having daycare that is only from 7 pm to 7 am, which coincides with the 24-hour care. ‘So, like someone could do, like a 7pm to 7am. So

somewhere where either they can either come into the home or they drop their kids off like they do for daycare, to kind of have like that resource or if they go to night classes or if they have to pick up an extra shift for some reason, then they have that no resource like, you know, we don't really have those types of daycares. Like I've seen like every now and then I'll look aside for like a 24-hour daycare, but you know, you really don't have those somewhere where you can drop the kid off at for that and then for the place of employment'. (Charlotte)

Discussion

This study examined how Black working mothers navigated the intersection of career responsibilities, childcare demands, mental health, and educational pursuits during the COVID-19 pandemic using a qualitative grounded theory approach. Three primary thematic categories emerged from the data: individual resources, mental health, and the interdependence between these domains. To provide a clear and systematic interpretation of these findings, this discussion is organized in direct alignment with the study's research questions.

Research Question 1

How do Black working mothers describe their experiences balancing career responsibilities, childcare, and educational pursuits during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Findings indicate that participants experienced balance not as a stable or achievable state, but as an ongoing process of negotiation across competing roles. Black working mothers described managing professional, familial, and academic responsibilities simultaneously within the same physical and temporal spaces, particularly during remote work conditions. Strategies such as scheduling, time blocking, and structured routines were frequently employed to maintain a sense of control and organization. However, these strategies were often insufficient in mitigating the cumulative demands placed on participants. The convergence of responsibilities contributed to persistent role strain, requiring participants to continuously shift attention across domains without adequate recovery. These findings suggest that balance during the pandemic was characterized by adaptation and endurance rather than equilibrium.

Research Question 2

What barriers and challenges do Black working mothers encounter when attempting to continue their education while managing professional and family responsibilities?

The findings reveal that decision-making fatigue and mental health strain functioned as primary barriers to educational persistence. Participants consistently described serving as the

default parent, assuming primary responsibility for household decision-making even within two-parent households. This ongoing cognitive labor contributed to significant fatigue, reducing participants' ability to engage in sustained academic work. Additionally, experiences of anxiety, overstimulation, and exhaustion further limited cognitive capacity and focus. These overlapping conditions created an environment in which educational engagement became increasingly difficult to maintain. The identification of decision-making fatigue as a central barrier extends existing literature by highlighting its role as a mechanism through which cumulative stress disrupts long-term goal attainment, particularly in educational contexts.

Research Question 3

How do Black working mothers perceive the role of mental health and decision-making fatigue in shaping their educational and career-related decisions?

Participants perceived mental health and decision-making fatigue as critical factors influencing their ability to make and sustain decisions related to education and career advancement. Prolonged exposure to stress, coupled with limited opportunities for recovery, diminished participants' cognitive and emotional capacity to engage in intentional decision-making. Many described difficulties concentrating, increased emotional strain, and a reduced ability to plan for long-term goals. Decision-making fatigue emerged as a cumulative process, shaped by the constant need to manage competing responsibilities across work, home, and education. As a result, participants' educational decisions were often reactive rather than strategic, reflecting immediate demands rather than future-oriented planning. These findings underscore the extent to which mental health is not peripheral but central to decision-making processes.

Research Question 4

What types of resources and support systems do Black working mothers identify as necessary to sustain their mental well-being and educational persistence?

Participants identified both formal and informal support systems as essential to their ability to cope and persist. Access to culturally competent mental health services, particularly Black therapists, was consistently identified as a critical resource. Participants emphasized that culturally aligned support reduced the need to contextualize their experiences and allowed for more effective emotional processing. In addition, childcare support, flexible work arrangements, and employer-

provided educational funding were identified as key enablers of persistence. These resources facilitated the redistribution of time and energy, allowing participants to engage more fully in educational pursuits. The findings indicate that such supports are not supplementary but foundational to sustaining both mental well-being and academic engagement.

Integrated Discussion

Across all research questions, decision-making fatigue emerged as a central mechanism linking mental health, resource access, and educational persistence. The findings suggest that Black working mothers' ability to continue their education during the COVID-19 pandemic was not solely determined by motivation or access to opportunity, but by their capacity to manage sustained cognitive and emotional demands across multiple roles. When adequate resources were available, participants demonstrated greater ability to cope and persist; however, in the absence of such supports, psychological strain intensified, limiting engagement in educational pathways.

Taken together, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of how structural constraints, resource availability, and psychological strain interact to shape Black working mothers' educational trajectories. By explicitly aligning the discussion with each research question, this study clarifies the conditions under which educational persistence is either supported or hindered during periods of crisis and contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Black working mothers in higher education contexts.

Conclusion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of how Black working mothers navigated the intersecting demands of career responsibilities, childcare, mental health, and educational pursuits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a qualitative grounded theory approach, the findings illuminate the complexity of balancing multiple roles within constrained environments shaped by structural inequities and limited support systems. Central to these experiences was the emergence of decision-making fatigue as a critical mechanism influencing participants' ability to engage in and persist with educational and professional goals.

The results demonstrate that Black working mothers' educational trajectories were not solely determined by motivation or access to opportunity, but by their capacity to manage sustained cognitive and emotional demands across competing responsibilities. Mental health challenges, including anxiety, exhaustion, and cognitive overload, were deeply embedded in participants' daily experiences and significantly shaped their decision-making processes. At the same time,

access to culturally competent mental health services, childcare support, and flexible employment resources played a pivotal role in mitigating these challenges and enabling persistence.

Importantly, this study contributes to literature by foregrounding the interconnected nature of mental health, resource access, and decision-making in the lives of Black working mothers. The findings underscore the need for institutions, employers, and policymakers to move beyond individual-level explanations and consider the structural conditions that influence educational persistence. Supporting Black working mothers requires intentional investment in culturally responsive services, accessible childcare, and workplace policies that acknowledge the realities of balancing multiple roles.

In conclusion, this study highlights that resilience alone is insufficient to overcome systemic barriers. Instead, meaningful change requires the development of comprehensive support systems that reduce cognitive and emotional burden while promoting equitable access to educational advancement. By centering the lived experiences of Black working mothers, this research offers critical insights into how institutions can better support this population, particularly during periods of crisis and disruption.

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