

STRESS COPING OF EXPATS LIVING IN SAUDI ARABIA, RIYADH DURING COVID-19

Ghazala Imran, Prince Sultan University
Sumbal Riaz Malik, Prince Sultan University
Nageena Imran, Prince Sultan University
Shahnila Tariq, Prince Sultan University

ABSTRACT

The main aim of our study is to explore how expats living in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh, coped with their stress during the times of COVID-19. We also determined the two kinds of stressors, a) Distress (the type of stress that causes great anxiety and pain and b) Eustress – the beneficial stress. A self-formulated online survey was conducted and participants in Riyadh were asked to fill in the information required. A total of 180 participants took part in the study to share their strategies of coping with stress during the pandemic. Results indicated that although participants were stressful, they still managed to cope with this pandemic generating healthy activity such as cooking new recipes, spending quality time with their family. As expats were not able to travel, they worried about their loved ones. For it, they connected with them through social media such as through WhatsApp, video calls or Facebook. Women were found to be more connected religiously and spend their time praying for everyone. With great amount of stress and anxiety due to this pandemic, development of coping strategies to keep themselves healthy and normal for them was witnessed as pivotal point for survival.

Keywords: Expats, Saudia Arabia, Stress, Coping Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Various researches have been conducted with respect to the rise of stigmatization and prejudice when individual is diagnosed with specified illness (Levy, 2020). Nevertheless, outbreak of the corona virus pandemic (COVID-19) played a crucial role of the zeitgeist as its spread led to havoc within national economies globally. World Health Organization confirmation of it as the most severe form of air-borne virus causing respiratory problem, signifies how it is transmissible and capable of spreading in individuals of all age, gender and race (Sohrabi et al., 2020).

With its huge impact on the psychological wellbeing of individuals, public health measures were taken in almost every country to cease the transmission of diseases (Mukhtar, 2020). Considering the new strain of coronavirus, significance of early precautionary actions was witnessed worldwide like specifically Saudi Arabia imposed travel ban even during the time period of Hajj (Alshammari et al., 2020). Simultaneously, lockdown was implemented, borders were closed-restricting even the expats to travel back to their homeland and indulge themselves in working from home.

Government took the initiative of providing the basic necessities at door step to their citizen in order to avoid people gathering and creating chaos when fulfilling their needs. Schools and offices were shut down for months. Everything was shifted to online working from home (Mukhtar, 2020). Teachers, students, office employees, other staff members, even doctors, everyone became equipped with the use of technology and online working from home. Some found it quite effective, some found it useless and boring. According to United Nation's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNISECO), COVID-19 has deferred the educational learning of over one billion students in 129 different countries around the globe. Although it made students more equipped to the use of technology via online learning, but it also induced high level of anxiety and extra pressure (Liu et al., 2012).

The symptoms of this disease were mainly equine influenza and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). It is highly transmissible and is capable of deeply affecting your body organs such as the lungs, making them so weak to the extent that it is incurable. The financial and socio-psychological damage brought upon different countries by this pandemic is inescapable. Many underdeveloped countries' economy has crashed due to severe lock down and the loss of capital. On 3rd April 2020, the Director-General of the WHO stated: “[COVID-19] is much more than a health crisis (Ghebreyesus, 2020). We are all aware of the profound social and economic consequences of the pandemic”. Import export was put to a halt; people could not travel to meet their loved ones which further induced great anxiety and depression in people. The hardest situation was inflicted upon those parents or relatives were affected due to corona. Anyone affected is immediately put into isolation for weeks, not knowing whether he/ she will come out alive. They are not allowed to meet anyone and if they pass away, no one is allowed to even attend the funeral of the diseased. It seemed as if the world was coming to an end. Present article aims to evaluate how the expats, living in Saudi Arabia, have managed to cope with their stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the absence of validate vaccine, precautionary measures and coping strategies has been accounted as the only means to reduce the incidence of respective virus. Based on this objective, the researchers conducted a pilot study through online survey on expats living in Riyadh about how they coped with their stress during COVID-19.

Every year, Saudi Arabia experiences 3 kinds of population movements, i.e. international, domestic and mainly the pilgrims that come for Hajj & Umrah. On average every month, about 1 million pilgrims, from 180 different countries, converge with around 1 million Saudis (Sunni) (75% of the Saudi populace) in Saudi Arabia's two sacred locations and the closest section port of Jeddah. Second, is the Shiites Saudi National who travels to Saudi Arabia, Iran & Iraq for pilgrimage? Third, is the routinely travel to and from Saudi Arabia of the expats, the permanent residents or the visitors for tourism, estimated to be 3 million people each month (Ebrahim & Memish, 2020). It was noticed that the spread of the virus mainly matched these three types of the population movements. Off the three seeding patterns, the greatest effect of transmission was of the Shiites travelling from to Saudi Arabia back from Iran & Iraq after their pilgrimage (Ebrahim & Memish, 2020) (Figure 1).

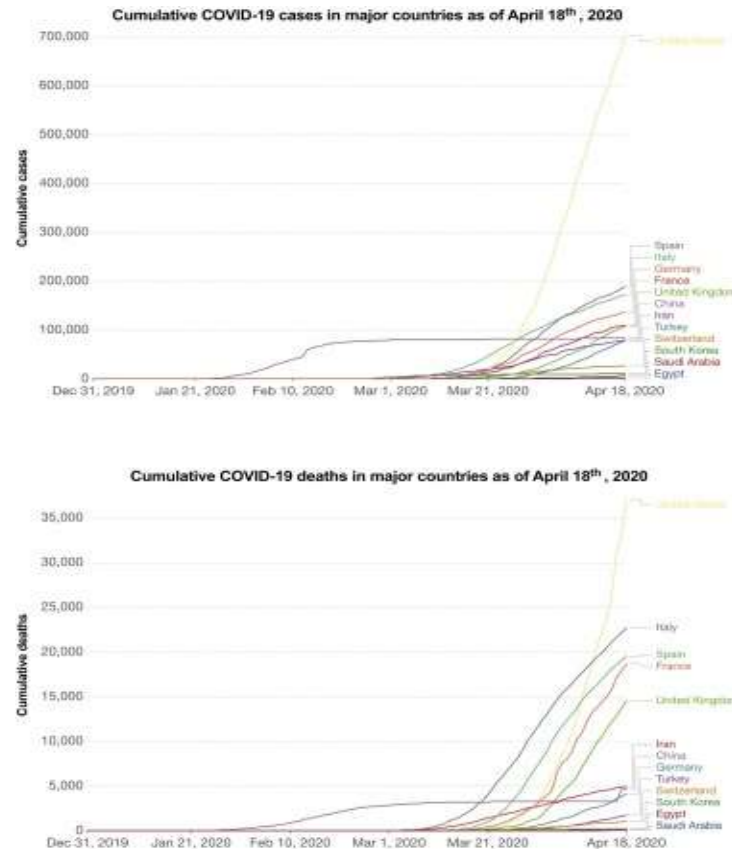


FIGURE 1
TOTAL COVID-19 CONFIRMED CASES AND DEATHS IN SAUDI ARABIA AND OTHER MAJOR COUNTRIES AS OF MARCH 30TH, 2020.

Ebrahim & Memish (2020) state in one of their articles that in the early stages of the pandemic, high ratio of the COVID-19 individuals was found to be situated in Riyadh, K.S.A.

Saudi government claims that the transmission of virus was found in 67% of the Saudi Nationals who might be exposed overseas and returned home, Riyadh. To surprise, the country's endeavor to distinguish and isolate returning Saudi nationals demonstrated inefficient in the transmission of the virus throughout the country. The continuous domestic transmission in the nation is to a great extent powered by returning Saudi-national pilgrims. Therefore, the only solution Saudi Arabia had was to restrict the flights to pilgrimage to restrict the access to the holy sites. Only this was going to break off the transmission of the COVID & confine people to their homes for their safety (Figure 2).

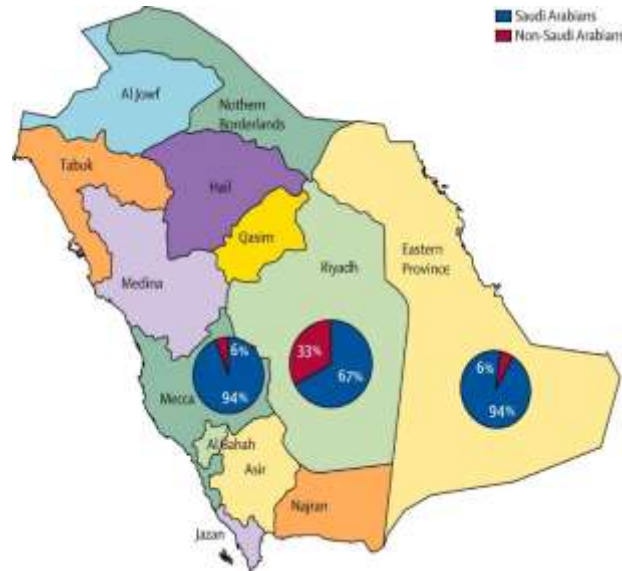


FIGURE 2
COVID-19 DISTRIBUTION IN SAUDI ARABIA ON MARCH 15, 2020, BY NATIONALITY

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Convenient sampling method was employed to select a sample of 180 expats ranging from 18 to 55 years. Expats were approached through online surveys (covering from different socioeconomic classes) with citizenship of their native country, Pakistan. The sample comprised of both males ($n=90$) and females ($n=90$), living within a joint ($n=50$) or nuclear ($n=130$) family system. The instruments used to collect information in this study included consent form, demographic sheet and online survey developed by the authors of the study based on prior literature. Data collection was carried out by sending survey to the participants through Gmail.

Significance of the study was placed on including the sample of expats as lockdown and travel ban somehow led to upheaval. Most of the participants were working with an extremely busy schedule, starting from 7 am in the morning till 6 pm in the evening.

RESULTS

From the results of the survey conducted, it was discovered that people focused more on generating healthy activities such as females trying new recipes from YouTube and cooking a nice meal other than the routinely nosh for their family. This helped break the typical taste of a typical lunch/ dinner meal and enjoy something new. Workaholics were found to be benefiting the most by resting at home, recovering their sleep, being able to give time to their family and managing their work from home as well. They got a chance to care on their health such as giving rest to those drained nerves and relax them till they're working from home. Some of the participants who filled the survey were also newly married. Therefore, they also shared their experience of staying at home in lockdown during COVID-19. They stated how happy they were at the beginning when all they had to do was just work from home, had ample time to share with

one another and watch movies together, spending quality time. This aided in strengthening their bond and as many stated, it helped in controlling their expenses which led to saving a great amount of money as well. But as months passed, they eventually got bored staying in lockdown, not even being able to go for dine-outs which were hugely tedious and monotonous. Those worried about their relatives were able to video chat/ call through WhatsApp or any other social site that helped relieved their stress of how they were doing. Video calls are a major source of sustenance in today's world esp. to the expats living abroad in different countries. Media is one of the factors that play a role in increasing stress. It displays news in an overly exaggerated manner that worries those living abroad. Thus, many participants also claimed that they avoided watching news and other social media that ought to manifest the pandemic falsely.

People eventually realized that this pandemic is not ending any time soon. Therefore, they believed they have to come up with coping strategies themselves to manage their stress and anxieties so they're behaviors are normal once this pandemic ends. The survey results showed that people began looking at the bright side. They started appreciating the little things in their environment and the blessings they were blessed with. People believed that they got an opportunity to spend more time with their family & loved ones, so why not make the best use of it and carry out productive tasks that the busy routine held them from doing. Similarly, the severity of symptoms was examined to be dependent on how individual perceived threat especially when their family was around or residing far from them in their homeland.

Managing both household chores and work-related priorities increased the difficulty to bring equilibrium when working from home. Increased level of stress was found as extension in lockdown and situation throughout kept worsening. Within 5 weeks of the pandemic, rate of stress levels increased up to 80% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Increased stress level effecting individuals psychologically led to witnessing negative traits within their personality. Participants had fear that COVID-19 was somehow unintentionally inducing other kinds of disorders in children and in adults such as OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) & also enhanced suppressed disorders such as severe anxiety and depressive disorders (Joseph et al., 2020).

Furthermore, from the survey results it was determined that many individuals were found to be more focused towards praying. They spent their time connecting with the Almighty, reciting Quran and tasbeeh. This helped them heal spiritually and generated a feeling of calmness and patience in them. It made them believe that whatever is happening, is happening by the will of HIM alone and it will be put to an end soon. Many participants were also found to be more cautious of their diet & health. By staying at home you are more prone to gaining weight. Therefore, they set about routinely brisk walk inside their homes for about an hour and a half that helped them remain fit, active and practice mindfulness. Mindfulness makes you more focused and helps to open your vision for future positively (Powell, 2018).

Now, as the doctors' state there are still chances of the pandemic to reoccur if the proper SOPs are not followed. Thus, it is on us to how to prevent it from spreading again. Below are a few MUST SOPs one must follow at all times to intercept its advancement.

1. Washing your hands frequently.
2. Use of mask.
3. Use of hand sanitizers.
4. Maintain a social distance of at least 6ft.
5. Keeping your environment clean at all times.

People were found to have become fearsome, who tended to waste food before the spread of disease. They seemed to be more contained and avoided wasting edible items.

DISCUSSION

Respective article highlights an in-depth view of how people living abroad came up with coping strategies to deal with their stress and anxiety during the times of COVID-19.

As the article survey was strictly on expats living in Saudi Arabia, therefore the study cannot be generalized on participants with different characteristics. It can be that participants who took part in the survey, their responses might change after time fluctuation, might be due to lack of interest to be part of the survey for further research or changing trends.

Saudi Arabia was amongst the first countries to implement early precautionary measures for its residents, to prevent the transmission of SARS-Cov-2. Its first case of COVID-19 was reported on March 2nd, 2020 (Powell, 2018), after which immediate necessary measures were taken to mitigate its impact. This country holds about 34 million people in which 37% happen to be the expats from all over the world (Joseph et al., 2020). It grants free medical care to the residents i.e. provides the best insurance especially to those who are unable to afford their medical in another country. Saudi vision 2030 is thinking about major auxiliary changes in the medical care part to satisfy the developing need for medical care administrations in the realm. Saudi Arabia is additionally one of the signatories on the WHO International Health Regulation and has been covering pandemic readiness from that point onward and following the WHO policies on infection, prevention and control (IPC). As mentioned before, Saudi Arabia's first case emerged on 2nd March, 2020, preceding 92 deaths. Toward the start of COVID-19 outbreak in Saudi Arabia, most of the cases seem to enhance due to the return of the travelers and their immediate contacts (Algaissi et al., 2020). Below is a graph that illustrates the confirmed cases and deaths in Saudi Arabia and other major countries as of March 30th, 2020.

Dating back to first influenza spread similar to Covid-19, it has been reported that the patients with anxiety may feel weak and feeling of nausea or fainting (Taylor et al., 2008). Similarly, from the survey conducted, results showed that people became more frustrated by staying indoors and doing all work from home. They developed depression over the days, felt lazy and lethargic. A feeling of paranoia seemed to increase as they were unable to travel and meet their family. When all family members had to live together all the time, it seemed to have become difficult to bear one another. People became short tempered and felt agitated when they had nothing to do. It was detected that many individuals began spotting on more negative than positives in their life which also led to increased stress, anxiety and depression. Children were induced with so much fear to this disease that they washed hands abnormally many times in a day and took bath multiple times even if their hands slightly touched the floor mistakenly. This caused skin rashes to children and even led to the development of abnormal behaviors and anxiety.

CONCLUSION

With great amount of stress and anxiety due to this pandemic, development of coping strategies to keep themselves healthy and normal for them was witnessed as pivotal point for survival. Staying united, fighting disease together and following the proper SOPs till the

vaccination was claimed to be their main priority to keep people safe residing within their community.

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