

Psychology of Uncertainty: An Assessment of Level of Coronavirus Anxiety among Undergraduate Students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

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Abstract

The study assessed the level of Coronavirus Anxiety among Undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The study was guided by a research question and a null hypothesis. Survey research design was employed in the study. Data were collected via online Google forms designed by the researchers and disseminated to the undergraduate students through their various students' whatsapp groups and personal whatsapp to some students. In all, 144 students form the sample of the study. COVID-19 Anxiety Scale, with a reliability of .879, was the instrument used. Data collected were statistically analysed using descriptive statistics and t-test. The findings of the study revealed that undergraduate students experience moderate level of Coronavirus Anxiety, and that no significant difference exists between coronavirus anxiety of male and female students. It is recommended that both male and female undergraduate students should employ coronavirus coping strategy with a view to keeping the anxiety within a tolerable limit and observe all safety measures so as to stay safe in the midst of the pandemic.

Keywords: Uncertainty, COVID-19, Anxiety, Undergraduate, Students

Introduction

Uncertainty is all around human beings. The current COVID-19 pandemic has heightened uncertainty over economy, education, employment, finances, relationships, and of course, physical and mental health. Yet as human beings, everyone craves for security. Maslow proposes that human beings have the need for safety most, after

physiological needs are met. Fear and uncertainty can leave one feeling stressed, anxious, and powerless over the direction of one's life. It can drain a person emotionally and trap one in a downward spiral of endless "what-ifs" and worst case scenarios about what tomorrow may bring (Robinson & Smith, 2020). People are different in how much uncertainty they can tolerate in life. Some people seem to enjoy taking risks and living unpredictable lives, while others find the randomness of life deeply distressing. But everyone has a limit. If one feels overwhelmed by uncertainty and worry, it is important to know that one is not alone; many people globally are in the same boat at this time.

The COVID-19 pandemic is changing and has already changed the collective estimations and expectations of uncertainty because there is no reference case for the COVID-19 crisis in living memory (Asmundson & Taylor, 2020). There have been flu pandemics. There was Black Monday and the 2008 financial crisis. But from a vantage point, the COVID-19 pandemic is more global in scope, more profoundly impactful and far-reaching, and more complex than any other crisis that today's decision-makers have experienced or contemplated. No country in this world has spared itself from the impact of COVID-19 pandemic which in consequence has generated anxiety due to uncertainty the future holds in all ramifications of human endeavour.

If one follows social media for any length of time, one might feel like going to bed and pulling the covers over one's head. Long-standing research shows that chronic TV watchers and news followers have elevated fears because everything they see starts to feel like it is happening outside their front door (Robinson, 2020). The coronavirus is here, and some news feeds seem to exaggerate fears. However, with strict restrictions in all human endeavours including school closure, banning social gatherings, the stock market plunging, social distancing, travel bans and rising death rates, anxiety level among people is still there. In some cases, panic due to drastic changes caused by the COVID-19 and fear of the unknown are travelling faster than the coronavirus itself (Robinson, 2020). It is natural for human beings to remain tense in the wake of uncertainty, however, the key is to remain level-headed, sensible and avoid stressful thoughts.

The psychology of Nigerians is at stake by the level of uncertainty and this may sustain tremendous anxiety. This is because human survival brain is constantly updating the world, making judgments about what is safe and what is not. To the mind, uncertainty equals to danger. If the brain does not know what is around the corner, it cannot keep someone out of harm's way. It always assumes the worst, over-personalizes threats and jumps to conclusions (Robinson, 2020). Human brain could do almost anything for the sake of certainty; sometimes people overestimate threats and underestimate their ability to handle them—all in the name of survival. When certainty is questioned,

the stress response goes haywire, instantly arousing the fight-or-flight reaction. Sometimes the brain prefers to know an outcome one way or another to take the edge off. Studies show that one is calmer anticipating pain than anticipating uncertainty because pain is certain (Robinson, 2020).

The World Health Organization has reported several types of viral infections, and millions of people are at risk for these diseases in various ways worldwide (Al-Hazmi, 2016). The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is known as a general health crisis that has caused challenges for mental resilience and has been the biggest outbreak since the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003. Wang, Pan, Wan, Tan, Xu, and Ho, (2019) evaluated psychological impacts, depression, stress, and anxiety at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. In the study, 1,210 participants from 194 cities in China answered an online questionnaire. The study showed that 53.8% of these people experienced severe psychological impacts of the outbreak. Moreover, 16.5%, 28.8%, and 8.1% of the respondents reported moderate to severe levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, respectively.

COVID-19 as an emerging infectious disease was first identified in Wuhan, China which endangers human health and consequently caused deaths. COVID-19 imposes irreversible psychological impacts on human societies. For example, complete quarantine and commuting restrictions that prevent people from going out, fear of contracting the disease, anxiety about losing loved ones, and more importantly, depression following losing friends and family members are some of the issues people battle with. The world has witnessed several widespread outbreaks of acute respiratory illnesses. For example, SARS as a communicable infectious disease spread in 2003; but, it was largely managed by quarantine measures. The COVID-19 outbreak creates anxiety among people, especially in affected families, and the media have huge impacts on increasing mental distress (Al-Rabiaah, Temsah, Al-Eyadhy, Hasan, Al-Zamil & Al-Subaie, 2020). For instance, some media have been using the term “end of the world” since the spread of the disease, leading to increased concern and uncertainty (Rubin & Wessely, 2020).

Some countries’ social stability has seriously been affected by COVID-19. In addition, the rate of distress among healthcare staff is higher compared with the general population, because they are more at risk of infection and transmission (Al-Rabiaah, Temsah, Al-Eyadhy, Hasan, Al-Zamil & Al-Subaie, 2020).

AlNajjar, Attar, Farahat and AlThaqafi (2017) in a study that investigated the psycho-behavioural responses of adults to the MERS-CoV epidemic in Jeddah shopping centres in western Saudi Arabia, found that anxiety levels were significantly associated with increased perception of susceptibility to infection and social avoidance

behaviours related to travel and being in public places. Xu et al. (2020) figured out that anxiety and fear were very prevalent among patients with COVID-19. Hence, they conducted accurate assessments and provided warnings to deal with this psychological crisis by providing rehabilitation programmes using traditional Chinese medicine.

Statement of the problem

As the level of uncertainty rises due to COVID-19 pandemic, with schools' closure and the Government's caution in reopening schools in an attempt to contain the spread of the disease and the fact that Coronavirus has affected many families, this experience has left an indelible mark on the psyches of many undergraduate students. Nigerian Universities have been reopened after a long period of closure by the Federal Government with strict guidelines which must be adhered to by both students and staff. The undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University are resuming in batches so as to decongest lecture rooms, hostels and other public places, all in an attempt to safeguard the university community from contracting and spreading the disease. These measures put in place to manage the second wave of Coronavirus pandemic may in turn sustain the anxiety associated with the disease. Thus, this paper assesses the level of corona virus anxiety among Undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Research Question

This study intends to answer this research question:

1. What is the level of coronavirus anxiety among Undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria?

Hypothesis

This hypothesis was tested in this study:

Ho1: There is no significant difference between level of coronavirus anxiety of male and female undergraduate students of Ahamdu Bello University, Zaria.

Methodology

This study employed survey research design in assessing the level of Coronavirus anxiety among undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. This design encompasses collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions (Check & Schutt, 2012). For the purpose of feasibility of this study due to schools' closure posed by COVID-19 pandemic, data were collected via online Google forms designed by the researchers and disseminated to the undergraduate students through their various students' Whatsapp groups and personal whatsapp to some students. In all, 144 students responded to the questionnaires after a wide online publicity by the researchers; these 144 students form the sample of the study.

COVID-19 Anxiety Scale is a 10-item scale that seeks to measure the level of anxiety associated with Coronavirus Disease. It is measured on five Likert Scale ranging from not at all with the score of 0, rarely - 1, severally - 2, more than 7 days - 3 to everyday - 4. COVID-19 Anxiety scale was adapted from Yıldırım, Akgül and Geçer (2020). For the purpose of this study, the instrument was validated by professionals in the Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria while the reliability coefficient was established using Cronbach Alpha. Thus, COVID-19 Anxiety scale has the reliability index of .879. Data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics; mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research question while t-test was used to test the null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance.

Presentation of results

Undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello Univesrsity, Zaria have undergone COVID-19 Anxiety screening using COVID-19 Anxiety Scale adapted from Yıldırım, Akgül and Geçer, (2020) via online Google forms. The scale is scored as follows:

- 0 - 10 No coronavirus anxiety
- 11 - 20 Low coronavirus anxiety
- 21 - 30 Average coronavirus anxiety
- 31 - 50 High coronavirus anxiety

Research Question: What is the level of coronavirus anxiety among undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria?

Table 1: Descriptive statistics showing level of coronavirus Anxiety among Undergraduate Students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

Variable	N	Mean	SD
COVID-19 Anxiety	144	25.377	8.817

Table 1 shows that undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University have moderate level of coronavirus anxiety as their mean score of 25.377 falls within the average level of the scoring guide of the instrument.

Ho1: There is no significant difference between coronavirus anxiety of male and female undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Table 2: t-test on Difference between coronavirus anxiety of male and female undergraduate students of ABU, Zaria

Variables	N	Mean	t	Df	MD	P-value
Male	74	24.90	1.033	142	1.7	.303
Female	70	26.60				

Table 2 shows that there is no significant difference between coronavirus anxiety of male and female students with the mean of 24.90 for male students and 26.60 for female students, and p-value of 0.303 which is greater than .05 level of significance. This means that both male and female undergraduate students experience about the same level of coronavirus anxiety. Thus, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference between coronavirus anxiety of male and female undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University is hereby retained.

Discussion of the findings

This study found that undergraduate students of ABU Zaria experience moderate Coronavirus anxiety. Many studies on the coronavirus and its psychological effects are on-going. This finding corroborates AlNajjar, Attar, Farahat and AlThaqafi (2017) who in a study that investigated the psycho-behavioural responses of adults to the MERS-CoV epidemic in Jeddah shopping centres in western Saudi Arabia, found that anxiety levels were significantly associated with increased perception of susceptibility to infection and social avoidance behaviours related to travel and being in public places. It is also in line with Wang et al (2019) who evaluated psychological impacts, depression, stress, and anxiety at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. In this study, 1,210 participants from 194 cities in China answered an online questionnaire. The study showed that 53.8% of these people experienced severe psychological impacts of the outbreak. Moreover, 16.5%, 28.8%, and 8.1% of the respondents reported moderate to severe levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, respectively.

Also Xu et al. (2020) figured out that anxiety and fear were very prevalent among patients with COVID-19. Hence, they conducted accurate assessments and provided warnings to deal with this psychological crisis by providing rehabilitation programmes using traditional Chinese medicine.

This study also found no significant difference between coronavirus anxiety of male and female undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. This study disagrees with a cross-sectional study by Al-Rabiaah et al. (2020) who explored the impact of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV) epidemic

by examining medical students, and found that all of these students experienced stress and anxiety; however, female students were found with higher levels of stress and anxiety. This disagreement could be attributed to difference in location and methodology employed.

Hawryluck, Gold, Robinson, Pogorski, Galea and Styra (2020) in a study that examined the psychological impacts of quarantine during the SARS outbreak conducted on 129 people in Canada, indicated a high prevalence of psychological distress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) rate of 28.9% and a depression prevalence of 31.2%. Furthermore, there was a significant correlation between the duration of quarantine and the prevalence of PTSD symptoms; therefore, direct contact with a person with SARS exacerbated the symptoms of depression and PTSD.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study it is concluded that coronavirus anxiety is prevalent among undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria at moderate level. It is also concluded that both male and female students experience about the same level of coronavirus anxiety.

Recommendations

It is recommended that both male and female undergraduate students should employ coronavirus coping strategy with a view to keeping the anxiety within a tolerable limit and observe all safety measures so as to stay safe in the midst of the pandemic.

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