

**EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT OF THE
CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (COVID-19) OUTBREAK ON ASIAN STUDENTS
LIVING IN TURKEY**

Abdulhamid GUNDA

Abstract

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused widespread fear and stress around the world. People's reactions to the crisis have aggravated social problems such as social discrimination and xenophobia. The most vulnerable groups who have felt the immediate impact of outbreak-related discrimination include international students who originated from different countries in Asia. In this connection, the study aimed to explore the immediate psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on Asian students in Turkey. Significantly, this paper aimed to help gather valuable information in mapping psychosocial support guidelines for people affected by the pandemic.

The respondents of the study are bona fide students at different universities across Turkey. The study is cross-sectional and utilized a semi-structured questionnaire to collect the necessary data. The questions, which are researched and based on literature review, were sent to different organizations, associations, and/or groups of international students from Asia via a google form. Generally, the questionnaire included the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, COVID-19 impact, related specific psychosocial experiences, and the preventive measures taken during the pandemic. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized for data analyses. Chi-square test or Fisher's exact was applied to determine the variables that are associated with self-reported COVID-19 impact.

Furthermore, the work aimed for results that are beneficial to the tailoring of social support to the vulnerable groups during the outbreak through increasing public awareness and facilitation of more inclusive policies. It specifically looked for valuable results that will seek to help health policymakers and service providers to develop inclusive and effective interventions towards international students during disease outbreak such as the COVID-19.

Keywords: Asian students, psychosocial, discrimination, coronavirus disease

Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus that originated from Wuhan, China. According to World Health Organization (WHO), as of this writing, it has now infected more than 6.5 million people and has killed around 400,000 people around the world. Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness (WHO).

Because there is still no available specific interventions or vaccine against the virus, specialists have resorted to the control tools of isolation and quarantine. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread fear and stress around the world. People's reactions to the crisis have aggravated social problems like discrimination and xenophobia. Vulnerable groups that experience the immediate impact of outbreak-related discrimination include people from different countries in Asia. In Turkey, some foreigners, particularly international students, have experienced discriminatory reactions from the locals. There had been reports of such incidents

that happened generally in public places such as shopping malls, markets and in transport facilities.

This study aimed to explore the psychosocial impact of the outbreak on Asian students in Turkey. Specifically, the study explored the respondents' psychosocial experiences and their compliance with preventive measures and protocols throughout the pandemic. Significantly, this paper aimed to help gather valuable information which can support the baseline data in aid to the policy makers in mapping out psychosocial support guidelines for people affected by the pandemic.

Methods

Research Model

The study is cross-sectional and is highly descriptive. A semi-structured questionnaire was utilized to collect the necessary data. The set of questions used in the questionnaire are researched and based on literature review.

The questionnaires were sent to different organizations, associations, and/or groups of international students from Asia via google form. Generally, the questionnaire included the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, COVID-19 impact, related specific psychosocial experiences, and the preventive measures they have taken during the pandemic. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized for analyses of the data. Chi-square test or Fisher's exact was applied to determine the variables that are associated with the self-reported COVID-19 impact.

Population and Sample

Participants of this study are international students from different countries in Asia, who were officially enrolled at different universities across Turkey for the academic year 2019-2020. A total of 122 out of 130 participants, who responded to the survey, were validated and accepted

for the study. They were composed of 69 undergraduate and 53 graduate students. A google form link of the semi-structured questionnaire was sent to several international student groups through their personal and group social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. Table 1 summarizes the demographic profiles of the respondents.

Table 1: The summary of the respondents' demographic profiles (N=122)

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender	Male	69	56.6
	Female	53	43.4
Age	20 & under	27	22.2
	21-25	58	47.5
	26-30	26	21.3
	31 & above	11	9.0
Marital Status	Single	109	89.3
	Married	13	10.7

Educational Level	Undergraduate	69	56.6
	Graduate	53	43.4
Field of Study	Education, social & health sciences	72	59.0
		50	41.0
	Others		
Residence in Turkey		54	44.3
	Istanbul	68	55.7
	Outside Istanbul		
Home Country		70	57.4
	Southeast Asia	52	42.6
	Other regions		

Data Collection Instruments

A semi-structured questionnaire was used as the main instrument for the collection of necessary data. Using google form, a link to the questionnaire was sent to the heads of several international student associations around Turkey via email and to different groups of students

from Asia through their personal and or group social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. A heading letter to the participants or respondents was attached to the questionnaire. It contained instructions introducing the guidelines in filling out the form, the objectives and the significance of the research study and the importance of their voluntary, honest and sincere participation. They were also assured of the utmost observance of anonymity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS18.0). Specifically, Chi-square test or Fisher's exact were conducted to determine the association of the study variables. All the demographic variables were tested for association with the self-reported COVID-19 impact.

Findings

As shown in Table 1, the study was participated by 130 students from Asia. 122 out of 130 were included in the study after 8 responses were deemed invalid due to incompleteness of the criteria set for participants. The participants were composed of 70 students (57.4%) from the Southeast Asia and 52 students (42.6%) from the other regions in Asia. Statistical analysis on the country of origin of the respondents suggested that the incidence of discrimination was higher among students from the Southeast Asia than those from the other regions. More than half of the respondents (59%) were under the fields of social sciences and humanities, health allied sciences, and education. This demographic factor was link to the psychosocial experience variables such as fear of the virus and frequent talk about the pandemic virus. Analyses results showed that students from these field of studies have expressed more fear of the COVID-19 and that they talked about it more than those who were from the other disciplines. However, the Chi-square tests results revealed no statistical significant association between the self-reported COVID-19 impact and the socio-demographic profiles of the respondents.

Table 2 shows the summary of respondents' psychosocial experiences during the pandemic.

Table 2. Psycho-social experiences during the pandemic(N=122)

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Concern about COVID-19		
Much	84	68.9
Not much/ a little	38	31.1
Frequency of talk about COVID-19		
Much	75	61.5
Not much/ a little	47	38.5
Experience fear of COVID-19		
Much	64	52.5
Not much/ a little	58	47.5
Worry for family		
Much	87	71.3

Not much/ a little	35	28.7
Depressed of the COVID-19 origin		
Much	32	26.2
Not much/ a little	90	73.8
Experience feeling of hopelessness		
Often	28	23
Not often/ occasionally	94	77
Experienced related discrimination		
Yes	43	35.2
No	79	64.8
Heard about related discrimination		
Yes	88	72.1
No	34	27.9
COVID-19 impacted my life		
Agree	111	91
Disagree	11	9

Happy and satisfied at government's policies	76	62.3
Agree	46	37.7
Disagree		

As shown in the table above, the 91% of the participants reported that the pandemic has impacted their lives. While the majority of the respondents were very much concerned about COVID-19 (68.9%), frequently talked about it (61.5%), worried for their family back home (71.3%), almost half experienced only a little fear of COVID-19 (47.5%) and only 26.2% reported feeling of much depression in relation to the pandemic originating from Asia.

While 72% of the respondents have heard about corona-related discrimination, there was only 35% who have experienced as such. The incidence of discrimination is higher amongst the students from the Southeast Asian countries. The relationship of these variables was significant, $X^2(1, N=122) = 18.9, p < .05$. This implies that students from the Southeast Asia were more likely to experience discrimination than were those from the other regions.

Results show significant associations between the study area (field of study) and the variables fear of COVID-19 and frequent talk about Coronavirus. Students from education, social, and health sciences reported a higher rate of fear and a higher frequency of talk about the pandemic.

The participants reported a low incidence of hopelessness and a higher rate of satisfaction with the government's policies and these were found to be significantly related. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between feeling of hopelessness and the satisfaction with the government policies. The relationship was significant, $x^2(1, N=122) = 5.9, p < .05$.

Table 3: COVID-19 preventive measures taken during the pandemic (N=122)

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Postpone visit to the affected area		
Yes	102	83.6
No	20	16.4
Minimized contact w/ fellow Asians		
Yes	68	55.7
No	54	44.3
Strict compliance to handwashing		
Yes	113	92.6
No	9	7.4
Increased care for room ventilation		
Yes	106	86.9
No	16	13.1
Minimized visits to public gatherings		
Yes	112	91.8

No	10	8.2
Minimized visits to hospitals		
Yes	112	91.8
No	10	8.2
Using mask when going out		
Yes	121	99.2
No	1	0.8
Practice social-distancing		
Yes	118	96.7
No	4	3.3

As shown in table 3, the respondents have taken preventive measures to protect themselves from the pandemic virus. They religiously or strictly complied with the preventive measures and protocols as recommended.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The respondents' expression of the COVID-19 outbreak having impacted their lives implies the fact that the outbreak is already a pandemic. Its effects have already been felt worldwide regardless of race, geographic location and economic and social status. These findings are consistent with the results of related researches in the past like the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003. SARS-related fear, worry and helplessness were experienced by Asian students during the said epidemic.

This study revealed that more than 35% of the respondents have experienced discrimination and 72% have heard about COVID-19 related discrimination. Further analysis showed that this incidence of discrimination is most common among respondents from the Southeast Asian nations. These findings confirm the Chi-square test result which revealed a significant association between home country and incidence of discrimination both the heard and the first-hand experience. The implied causal factor of discrimination might be racial under the guise of prevention from the Coronavirus Disease. Significantly, it was neither structural nor institutional.

The significant relations between the study variables field of study and psychosocial experiences of the respondents suggests that students from health allied sciences, social sciences and education might be more sensitive to potential health risk or other social changes caused by the pandemic. And thus, more likely to be influenced.

Meanwhile, the results showed that the respondents did not experienced much hopelessness. This psychosocial experience of the respondents is significantly related to the host government's policies and protocols. This indicates that the government policies have positive impact on the respondents. During a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, highly vulnerable groups such as the international students who are away from their family, their immediate support system, need all the support they can get from all sources of strengths. In this instance, their host community or government plays a key role in their ability to cope with the crisis and to prevent or minimize any threat to their well-being.

Furthermore, most of the respondents have taken necessary prevention measures against Coronavirus Disease. This reflects their sensitivity to the virus' potential health risk and threats to well-being. This can be an indication of their concern about the virus and their coping mechanisms to minimize their fear and worries. Such attitudes of compliance with the preventive measures is a manifestation of the respondents' commitment to social accountability and their solidarity with their host communities.

In conclusion, the research suggests that the pandemic has a psychosocial impact on Asian students in Turkey. Furthermore, this also suggests that the related government policies had a positive impact on the respondents as manifested by the low rate of hopelessness related to happiness and satisfaction with the host government policies. It is therefore recommended that social support for foreign students should be included in the directives and policies tailored for a disease outbreak like COVID-19. Additionally, the small size sample and the bias susceptibility of the respondents' self-reported impact which may differ from their personal experiences limit the generalization of the findings. Thus, the findings are merely indicative and not conclusive. It is therefore recommended that future studies of the subject matter should explore further the causality of the psychosocial impact of such outbreak.

References

Article:

Bai Y, Yao L, Wei T, et al. Presumed Asymptomatic Carrier Transmission of COVID-19. *JAMA*. 2020;323(14):1406–1407. doi:10.1001/jama.2020.2565

Brown, E., Gray, R., Lo Monaco, S., O'Donoghue, B., Nelson, B., Thompson, A., ... McGorry, P. (2020). The potential impact of COVID-19 on psychosis: A rapid review of contemporary epidemic and pandemic research. *Schizophrenia Research*, 1–100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.schres.2020.05.005>

Cascella M, Rajnik M, Cuomo A, et al. Features, Evaluation and Treatment Coronavirus (COVID-19) [Updated 2020 May 18]. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2020 Jan-. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK554776/>

Coronavirus. (2020, June 5). Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Dong, E., Du, H., & Gardner, L. (2020). An interactive web-based dashboard to track COVID-19 in real time. *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 20(5), 533–534. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1473-3099\(20\)30120-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1473-3099(20)30120-1)

Fauci, A. S., Lane, H. C., & Redfield, R. R. (2020). Covid-19 — Navigating the Uncharted. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 382(13), 1268–1269. <https://doi.org/10.1056/nejme2002387>

Li, S., Wang, Y., Xue, J., Zhao, N., & Zhu, T. (2020). The Impact of COVID-19 Epidemic Declaration on Psychological Consequences: A Study on Active Weibo Users. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(6), 2032. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17062032>

Montemurro N. (2020). The emotional impact of COVID-19: From medical staff to common people. *Brain, behavior, and immunity*, S0889-1591(20)30411-6. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2020.03.032>Coronavirus. (2020, June 5). Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Ornell, F., Schuch, J. B., Sordi, A. O., & Kessler, F. H. P. (2020). “Pandemic fear” and COVID-19: mental health burden and strategies. *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry*, 42(3), 232–235. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1516-4446-2020-0008>

Qiu, J., Shen, B., Zhao, M., Wang, Z., Xie, B., & Xu, Y. (2020). A nationwide survey of psychological distress among Chinese people in the COVID-19 epidemic: implications and policy recommendations. *General psychiatry*, 33(2), e100213. <https://doi.org/10.1136/gpsych-2020-100213>

Ornell, F., Schuch, J. B., Sordi, A. O., & Kessler, F. H. P. (2020). “Pandemic fear” and COVID-19: mental health burden and strategies. *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry*, 42(3), 232–235. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1516-4446-2020-0008>

Ying Liu, Albert A Gayle, Annelies Wilder-Smith, Joacim Rocklöv, The reproductive number of COVID-19 is higher compared to SARS coronavirus, *Journal of Travel Medicine*, Volume 27, Issue 2, March 2020, taaa021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/taaa021>

Zheng G, Jimba M, Wakai S. Exploratory study on psychosocial impact of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak on Chinese students living in Japan. *Asia Pac J Public Health*. 2005;17(2):124-129. doi:10.1177/101053950501700211

Zheng, Y.-Y., Ma, Y.-T., Zhang, J.-Y., & Xie, X. (2020). COVID-19 and the cardiovascular system. *Nature Reviews Cardiology*, 17(5), 259–260. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41569-020-0360-5>

Book:

Cascella M, Rajnik M, Cuomo A, et al. Features, Evaluation and Treatment Coronavirus (COVID-19) [Updated 2020 May 18]. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2020 Jan-. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK554776/>