EMPLOYEE BEHAVIOR IN THE FACE OF COVID-19: STRESS AND COPING MECHANISM

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the psychological state of employees under the COVID-19 pandemic, the attendant job stress and corresponding coping mechanisms adopted to remain sustainable. The pandemic situation brought operating difficulties and challenges to many industries around the world, and organizational managers are challenged to have the ability to adapt to disasters and recover from such emergencies. We found that through the factors of the organizational culture, the abilities to organize and manage operations, the adaptation capacity as well as coping mechanisms of the organizations affects the development of organizational resilience and consequently sustainability of businesses. Workplace stress is bound to happen more regularly as there may be many stressors in life which range from personal to work-related especially as imposed by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, it is recommended for modern organizational managers that there should be social support coming from the workplace as integral in helping the employees cope with stress of such nature.

KEYWORDS: *Employee Job Stress, COVID-19 Impacts and Coping Mechanisms.*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people worldwide visibly seen in its effect on structures, systems and strategies of organizations; also its impact on people's health and restrictions on people's lives have now spurred organizational managers into strategic actions to ensure survival and sustainability (Edelheim, 2020; Sandhu & Wolf, 2020).

The idea of coping and its mechanism emanates from the concept of resilience and is originated from ecology, and defined as the system that absorbs changes and can continue to develop under disturbances and changing conditions (Holling, 1973).

In the field of business administration, organizations develop resilience in response to competitors' strategy changes and emergent events (Williams & Shepherd, 2016). An organization's capabilities and strategies to face crises affect its sustainable development and increase its chance of survival after crisis (Prayag *et al.,* 2018).

Natural disasters not only cause deaths and injuries to the people, but also change people's living environment and daily routines, resulting in their psychological threat and undermining their subjective well-being (Bonanno *et al.,* 2010; Sandhu &

Wolf, 2020). The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2013 has resulted in serious impacts on the lives and psychological well-being of the disaster victims (Murakami *et al.,* 2020).

From extant research, scholars have seldom studied how disaster threat perceptions may affect the individuals in corporate workplaces, as well as the negative impacts on employees' organizational performance (De Clercq *et al.,* 2017; Toker *et al.,* 2015).

Numerous studies have been conducted among health professionals to evaluate the impact of the pandemic related to job stress, depression, anxiety and insomnia; however, there are not many studies addressing the level of employee fear, irritation and stress, and depression related to uncertainty among the employees in organizations today.

After the outbreak of COVID-19, there are an increasing number of researches on employees' loyalty in organizational citizenship behavior, life satisfaction, and depression (Park *et al.,* 2021; Yan *et al.,* 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people's daily life, social life, and consumption patterns (Kim, 2020). For example, people's perception of threats under COVID-19 has increased

the amount and frequency of their alcohol consumption (Rodriguez *et al.,* 2020).

Prior studies also attempt to understand whether fake news content during the COVID-19 pandemic affects people's fears (Ljungholm & Olah, 2020; Sheares *et al.,* 2020). People feel anxious about threat perception, particularly under the threat of COVID-19 (Paredes *et al.,* 2021). Previous literature has suggested that people's anxiety arises from the spread of the epidemic when they do not believe that the epidemic can be controlled effectively, and they would perceive the epidemic as a threat (Goodwin *et al.,* 2021).

Prior researches show that COVID-19 affects people's emotions such as extreme anxiety, fear of disease, depression and psychological stress (Gibson & Janikova, 2021; Phillips & Kucera, 2021; Lewis & Zauskova, 2021). Therefore, it is a very reasonable speculation that people's fear of disease affects their emotions and then affects employees' work psychology; thus, resulting to job stress which forms a negative relationship between the individual and the environment and consequently the work outcomes.

When the individual perceives the job stress to be overwhelming, physical and mental problems may occur (He *et al.,* 2020). French and Kahn (1962) are the first to introduce the concept of job stress into business management. Job stress is produced by the discrepancy between personal ability, external resources, and the job's requirements (French, 1974). Parker and DeCotiis (1983) further defined job stress as an employee's awareness or feeling of personal dysfunction as a result of perceived conditions and the employee's psychological and physiological reactions to feeling uncomfortable, undesirable, or even threatened in the workplace.

COVID-19 has triggered various psychological phenomena such as moral harm, extreme anxiety, fear of disease, depression and acute stress and the epidemic affects the work of corporate personnel insecurity, job instability and job satisfaction (Nemțeanu & Dabija, 2021). This study therefore will help to make up for the gap in the above research. The review of work stress impact resulted from the pandemic and the consequent effect on work outcomes also includes coping mechanisms into the discussion, which is one of the contributions of this research in the academic field. Furthermore, this research can better understand the impact of the epidemic on human psychology, and expand the application of knowledge in the fields of human resource management and stress management in organizations. The findings can provide managerial implications to modern day organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Theoretical Framework
Conservation of Resource Theory (CORT)

The underpinning theory used in the present study is Conservation of resource theory (CORT) given by Hobfoll (1989). The theory explains that people feel stressed when their existing valuable resources are under threat and the new additional resources seem to be unreachable. It could help in understanding how the stressful events like COVID-19 pandemic influences employees and their work and family. Under CORT, all work-related conditions like objects, conditions, personal characteristics are called resources.

Moreover, the theory categorizes 74 resources into different categories, for example, primary resources (like food, shelter or clothing), secondary resources (like social support, belongingness the group, hope and optimism) and tertiary resources (like social status and luxurious life style) (Hobfoll & Wells, 1998). For the present study, the resource list consisted of resources like social support, time, hope and optimism as these resources are threatened by the current crisis leading to stress.

The Conservation of resource theory (CORT) has received a wide acceptance across countries (Halbesleben *et al.,* 2014; Hobfol *et al.,* 2016; Lin *et al.,* 2019). Studies have tested the theory and found that providing resources like training to enhance the skills of employees (in the form of resource gain) actually result in lower stress and heightened self-efficacy (Chen *et al.,* 2009). The CORT has been applied to promote the public health by proposing a framework to prevent resource loss and maintain the gain by engaging in healthy behavior (Hobfoll & Schumm, 2009).

Similarly, Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012) applied the CORT to examine the work-home conflict of resources and found that personal resources like time and energy can be utilized to improve the overall outcome.

The Concept of Employee Job Stress

Job stress is defined as employee's personal subjective feelings toward the environment. When important goals and results are not achieved, the employees may feel both physical and psychological stress. Moreover, job stress is also the main reason for employees' poor physical and mental health (Parker & DeCotiis, 1983; Haver *et al.,* 2019).

Prior research also verified that employees in the service industry have higher job stress, especially frontline employees, and job stress affects their job satisfaction (Cheng &Yang, 2018; Tongchaiprasit & Ariyabuddhiphongs, 2016).

Specifically, work stress leads to signs of tension, such as physical and mental fatigue, which can cause further conditions, such as obesity, hypertension, diabetes, sleep disorders, anorexia, and muscle stiffening, when symptoms get worse and chronic stress develops (Sobnqwi *et al.,* 2004). In addition, stress can exacerbate mental health issues and cause mental illnesses such as depression (Moudon, 2009). When employees are exposed to stress, direct damage to the company may occur. Tongchaiprasit and Ariyabuddhiphongs (2016) argued that work stress can reduce job satisfaction and increase turnover intention; Kim *et al.* (2015) explained that stress has a negative effect on job attitude; and Akgunduz (2015) reasoned that work stress negatively affects overall job performance. In other words, work stress can be said to be a detrimental negative factor that causes not only physical and mental damage in employees, but also directly affects the company performance.

Perceived Impacts from COVID-19
The impacts of COVID-19 on workers and workplaces across the globe have been dramatic. This broad review of prior research rooted in work and organizational psychology, and related fields, is intended to make sense of the implications for employees, teams, and work organizations. This review and preview of relevant literatures focuses on (a) emergent changes in work practices (e.g., working from home, virtual teamwork) and (b) emergent changes for workers (e.g., social distancing, stress, and unemployment). This broad-scope overview provides an integrative approach for considering the implications of COVID-19 for work, workers, and organizations while also identifying issues for future research and insights to inform solutions.

Emergent Changes in Work Practices
At the same time that COVID-19 abruptly upended normal work routines, it also caused an acceleration of trends that were already underway involving the migration of work to online or virtual environments. A key difference, though, is that WFH was previously often responsive to employee preferences but COVID-19 forced many into Mandatory Work from Home (MWFH), making it difficult to generalize prior findings.

Work from Home (WFH)
A Gartner (2020) survey of 229 human resources (HR) departments showed that approximately one half of the companies had more than 80% of their employees working from home during early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and estimated substantial long-term increases for remote work after the pandemic. The need for millions of workers to WFH in response to COVID-19 has accelerated recent remote work trends facilitated by the rise of connectivity and communication technologies. While "remote work" is a broader category because it can include "work from anywhere" (i.e., not necessarily home), it is known that some such as professionals who need to perform complex tasks that require little interaction with peers actually prefer and are more productive if they WFH (Allen *et al.,* 2014). Yet as large numbers of workers are forced to WFH, many face challenges due to such fundamental issues as not having space in one's home to attend to work. For example, employees who live with others also face a larger set of challenges than those who live alone because they need to navigate others' space as well.

Employees often find it challenging to maintain boundaries between work and non-work (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). The forced confinement of workers during the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated this issue.

While WFH might sound appealing if it offers a safe harbor, the absence of separation between one's work and home and the lack of commutes to provide a transition between the two domains can become a burden too. Given the likelihood that COVID-19 will accelerate trends toward WFH past the immediate impacts of the pandemic (Gartner, 2020), it is clear that the diversity of work arrangements will need to be studied. Future research should examine whether and how the COVID-19 quarantines that required millions to WFH affected work productivity, creativity, and innovation.

Independent from challenges that individuals can face when WFH, it is also notable that (a) the reluctance of many employers to adopt WFH before COVID-19 stemmed from a perceived lack of control that employers would have over employees who were out of sight and reach and (b) there is ample reason to expect that new modes of surveillance will accompany various WFH arrangements. Indeed, even before COVID-19, employers were adopting and developing technologies to monitor employees' whereabouts (e.g., with socio-metric sensors; Bhave *et al.,* 2020). Although managing-by-walking-around is not feasible when people are working remotely, the rapidly expanded usage of videoconferencing has allowed for virtual sight lines. Yet these virtual sight lines are fraught with a risk as they increase perceived stress and invade privacy. There is also evidence that such remote and automated monitoring can lead to the centralization of decision-making and (in the absence of countervailing action) contribute to lower creativity among employees working in lower organizational levels (Nell *et al.,* 2020).

Virtual Teamwork
Increased virtual teamwork emanated as a result of COVID-19 and has been observed to affect helping and pro-social behavior in organizations. As COVID-19 has accelerated the expansion of virtual teams, it will be valuable for organizational mangers to track and study innovations that may enable such teams to

function optimally. For example, the intersection of remote work with a global crisis brings up questions of how emotions, such as anxiety and stress, can best be communicated and regulated in the unique setting of virtually connected work where social and emotional cues are relatively limited (Lindebaum et al., 2018). On the other hand, there are prior studies showing that teams operating online tend to be more effective at brainstorming than face-to-face teams (DeRosa et al., 2007). In contrast, research focused on individual performance has shown that remotely interacting teammates appear to miss the creative benefits that can flow from frequent face-to-face interactions (Allen et al., 2015). The rapid growth in virtual teams offers an opportunity to examine new questions as well as develop interventions to help improve teamwork in virtual settings; and, in that pursuit, close attention needs to be paid to the multidimensional ways in which virtuality varies among remote teams (Mak & Kozlowski, 2019). The burgeoning area of research on teamwork in health care settings (Salas et al., 2018) where doctors and nurses in emergency rooms have long been working with each other behind masks offers a valuable model for teamwork that is not directly face to face.

Virtual Leadership and Management
The role of leaders to determine organizational outcomes that have a broad impact on employees at all levels is especially clear in the crucible of a crisis and certainly vital in fundamental ways. With the COVID-19 crisis requiring millions of employees across different hierarchical levels toWFH, it is reassuring to know that leadership can also work effectively from a distance (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Prior research shows that successful leaders are those skilled in a domain to make the right decisions and provide reassurance through a balanced mix of optimism and realism regarding the future. In other words, effective leaders strive (in any time period) to project vision a symbolic state of affairs with which the collective identifies—and to reify it (Antonakis et al., 2016).

Another possibility, which future research should examine, is that the move to high-virtuality work arrangements will foster more participatory relationships given that physical cues of dominance (e.g., size) are less salient in virtual environments.

Research on the effectiveness of leaders during and after the COVID-19 crisis should examine an array of activities, including the degree to which remote leaders are persuasive if they (a) clearly state their values that will guide institutional actions, (b) understand and openly discuss the travails and hopes of their collectives, (c) clearly communicate an ambitious vision of the direction that the unit will head toward, and (d) demonstrate confidence that strategic goals can be achieved.

These skills are referred to as charisma (Antonakis et al., 2016) and require domain expertise as well as training and investment. Indeed, crises can bring about changes in leadership styles (Stoker et al., 2019); thus, firms can expect to be better prepared by ensuring that they have adequately invested in professional development. Future research should estimate if and how organizational commitments to employees' professional development during the crisis pay later dividends. At a more basic level, it will be important to assess how COVID-19-induced changes in training programs (i.e., moving online) will affect the accessibility, efficiency, and efficacy of such programs (Cascio, 2019; Salas et al., 2012).

Among the more specific leader-subordinate activities that will be important to consider in relation to COVID-19 is how assessment and appraisal systems will function. For example, without being able to directly monitor subordinates in the way that office settings allow, there may be a shift to results-focused assessment, which prior research shows to be generally effective (Pritchard et al., 2008).
Over longer spans of time, though, working remotely may reduce the opportunities for subordinates to gain feedback from leaders and prior research suggests that a lack of learning opportunities is associated with lower organizational commitment and higher risk of turnover (Vandenberghe et al., 2019). In addition, future research should examine how trust can be built remotely with online interactions so that newcomers are not disadvantaged due to the lack of face-to-face interactions with their supervisors (Dunbar, 2018).

Emergent Changes for Workers
In addition to the immediate impact of COVID-19, there is also likely to be a diverse range of social-psychological, health-related and economic costs of the pandemic for individuals, including for those (a) whose work was made virtual or remote, (b) who continued as "essential" workers, and (c) who were laid off either temporarily or permanently.

While the previous section on work practices focused on those whose work was made virtual, this section as well as the rest of this article have broad relevance for everyone affected by COVID-19, including essential workers and those who have been laid off.

Coping Mechanisms and Resources
In the face of these attendant realities, coping mechanisms at the disposal of organizational managers include proactive organizational resilience, which is to build organizations' readiness for changes, and reactive organizational resilience, which is to respond to and recover from crises (Jia et al., 2020). In addition, some scholars have defined resilience as leadership and management, core competence of staff, market sensitivity,

situational awareness, and preparedness plans (Tibay *et al.,* 2018).

Resilience of an enterprise during a crisis is very important for coping mechanisms, crisis management and survival of the enterprise. Organizational resilience affects the organization's adjustment of operating strategies during a crisis, and also affects employees' work experience and pressure in the organization (Tibay *et al.,* 2018). Scholars have indicated that companies should focus on building complete resilience of mobility, rather than building step-by-step planning capability (Somers, 2009).

Organizations demonstrate their resilience in an uncertain environment by adjusting their strategies, cooperating with their strategic partners, employee participation, continuous innovation and learning, and changes in management as the environment changes (Melian-Alzola *et al.,* 2020)

Accordingly, stress management is essential for consistent performance, and leaders help staff members cope with stress during uncertain situations (Jyoti & Bhau, 2017). The role of leaders influences workplace stress. Supportive leadership behaviors help subordinates manage stress and deal with ambiguous situations (Abbasi, 2018). Moreover, training programs enable individuals to shift the mindset for stress management (Jamieson *et al.,* 2018) by being mindful about the current situation rather than reacting emotionally. A "stress optimism mindset" can be developed to positively manage stress level (Crum *et al.,* 2017).

Meanwhile, employment insecurity due to the economic crisis during and after the pandemic was observed as a potential stressor (Giorgi *et al.,* 2020; Wilson *et al.,* 2020) that adversely affected employee wellbeing and productivity. These findings underpin the relevance of examining the integrated effect of leadership behaviors, e-training, and employment security to manage academic staff's stress level and performance during the phase of virtual transformations. However, there is a gap in the current literature on leadership behavior, e-training, and employment security for academic staff during the pandemic crisis.

A review of the available literature revealed that research on leadership behaviors in the educational context is scarce. Most studies have been conducted in traditional and non-virtual scenarios (Hallinger *et al.,* 2020). Rare studies examined different aspects of leadership behaviors and practices in the educational context, for instance, instructional leadership (Liu & Hallinger 2017), contextual leadership (Noman *et al.,* 2016), and the role of leadership in financial management (Myende *et al.,* 2018). Meanwhile, there is a lack of studies, which addressed the role of leaders in managing performance of academic staff at the virtual workplace.

Based on the statement of Wieczorek and Manard (2018), more research is required on leadership experience with respect to the challenges posed by emerging policies and economic strains (Hallinger *et al.,* 2020).

A conceptual framework is developed based on the input–process–output (IPO) model and integrated with the JD–R theory. This conceptual model extends the understanding that tolerance of work transition, complexity, work burden, skill discretion, and the physical environment are job demands during the pandemic crisis that cause employees stress, anxiety, and burnout. Meanwhile, leadership behaviors, e-training, and employment security are some of the job resources that serve as input in the process of stress management; hence, productivity, adaptability, and performance are key outputs.

FINDINGS
When organizations face an externally unfavorable business environment, organizational leaders and managers put up resilient strategies in order to cope with the realities of turbulence and this consequently would elicit a positive impact on employee psychology. Therefore, business managers are expected to always promote resilience in order to effectively respond to changes in the environment, and more importantly, enhance morale of employees. During an epidemic such as the COVID-19 case, companies can reduce the work pressure, job stress of employees, thereby increasing job satisfaction and reducing turnover.

Previous research found a significantly positive relationship between coping mechanisms and resilience of organizations. We corroborate in the same view, thus, through the factors of the organizational culture, as well as the abilities to organize and manage operations, the adaptation capacity of the organizations affects the development of resilience and sustainability of organizations.

CONCLUSION
COVID-19 has brought operating difficulties and challenges to many industries around the world, and organizational managers must have the ability to adapt to disasters and recover from emergencies. The uncertainty arising from the pandemic is the main factor that causes the stress of employees. High stress level affects productivity, reduces employee job satisfaction and organizational trust, which may result in the failure of the entire organization. Therefore, organizations need to tackle the problem through identifying employee stress level, its causes and finding solutions to resolve the situations. Thus, the need for various modifications for organizations and individuals to cope

up in the face of this turbulence to have an insight on how to adapt to these changes and challenges has become more than ever before necessary.

Recommendations

Workplace stress is bound to happen more regularly as there may be many stressors in life which range from personal to work-related especially as imposed by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, it is recommended for modern organizational managers the following;

i) There should be social support coming from the workplace as integral in helping the employees cope with stress.

ii) There should be a strong social network at the workplace can play a crucial role in addressing high-stress levels.

iii) It is pertinent to establish a trustworthy relationship and create a conducive work environment for openness. An environment with strong social bonds among the employees who empower and support each other will undoubtedly help reduce stress levels through sharing.

iv) Though the findings suggest that managerial support is valued the most, formal employee assistance programs were non-existing in almost all the organizations.

v) The wellbeing of the employees could be significantly impaired if the organization does not have strategies to reduce the stressful conditions in their company.

vi) There should be flexibility and IT assistance as the main elements of support provided by organizations by actually investing in fostering creativity and being more compassionate with the employees.

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