

STRESSORS AND INTEGRATIVE COPING APPROACH TO MAINTAIN MENTAL WELLBEING AMONG HOTEL EMPLOYEES IN MALAYSIA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the tourism and hospitality industries with losses of multi-billion dollars and caused unprecedented mental wellbeing hazards globally. The COVID-19 has suddenly increased the stressful and challenging working conditions in the hospitality and tourism industries. Despite a significant number of studies on mental health due to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health studies and coping strategies among hotel employees in Malaysia are almost non-existent. Thus it is the purpose of this study to answer four research questions as follow; i) What are the types of stressors affecting hotel employees during the COVID-19 pandemic; ii) How these stressors influence the mental wellbeing of employees; iii) How different coping strategies exert influence towards mental wellbeing of employees, and iv) Does religious coping strategy significantly contribute towards positive mental wellbeing. Mainstream coping strategies highlight problem-focused, emotional-focused, and avoidance-focused but lacking the role of religion-focused coping. This study intends to use the mixed method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with hotel employees to gather information regarding sources of stress in the workplace during COVID-19. Then quantitative data will be collected using a survey questionnaire from 350 hotel employees from the east coast region (Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang). Finally, data analysis using SmartPLS will be implemented to examine the relationships among variables and to test the hypothesized model. The findings of this study will shed some light on stressors during COVID19 and the effective strategies for developing positive mental health among hotel employees in Malaysia.*

Keywords: *Integrative coping strategies, employee's wellbeing, mental health, religion-focused coping strategy*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the tourism and hospitality industries. Safety threat and risk of contagion led countries around the world impose movement control order (MCO) and travel restrictions. Data around the world shown tremendous decrease of hotel occupancy rate, monthly losses of one billion euros in tourism revenues, and fast decline in restaurant expenditure (Baker et al., 2020). Tourism industry in Malaysia is no exception in facing the devastating fate. This pandemic is estimated have incurred losses as much as RM100 billion in Malaysia in 2020 (Daim, 2021). Besides the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic on socioeconomics, it has led to damaging effect towards the mental health of societies and individuals (Alradhawi et al., 2020). The market sees many hospitality businesses being closed and employees being laid off. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, unemployment for April 2020 has risen to almost 150 thousand and among the most affected



workforce are those in the service sectors such as tourism, hospitality, and aviation (Zakaria, 2020).

As a major viral outbreak in the 21st century, the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has caused unprecedented mental wellbeing hazards globally (Alradhawi et al., 2020). The COVID-19 has suddenly increased the stressful and challenging working conditions of the hotel sector. Declines in the number of tourists due to the COVID-19 outbreak are reported as massive reductions in both supply and demand aspects of the economy mandated by governments internationally. Furthermore, the tourism industry is one of the hardest hit due to widespread travel restrictions and shelter-in-place orders designed to curb infection spread. Restrictions and lockdowns have devastated tourism-dependent destinations and displaced millions of vulnerable workers, causing them to lose their livelihoods. COVID-19 and related fears add further strains on tourism employees, potentially exerting a significant toll on mental and physical health and safety.

Furthermore, for those who are still working, the outbreak of COVID-19 has made a major switch in the regular working conditions worldwide correlated with high public uncertainty (Kanupriya, 2020). In addition to the stress associated with COVID-19 disease, the decline trend on tourism industry have caused the psychological disturbance on employees become more severe. The current situation with lockdown and work from home (WFH) has become stressful. Past studies have found that high workload with unrealistic deadlines, work-family imbalance and job insecurity are the main stressors for employees (Krantz et al., 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008; Sahni, 2016). Yet stressors affecting employees during COVID-19 are still unclear.

Stress and mental health are known to have a negative influence on employees' performance, productivity, and overall satisfaction. This needs to be tackled as an urgent occupational health issue. Stress is a complex problem and misunderstood by many people (Defrank & Ivancevich 1998). The stress in extended period generally results in lower performance levels, change in attitude and work withdrawals which often leads to faulty decisions and bad work relationships (Hallowell, 2005). Moreover, the prolonged stress can even cause many psychological disorder (Bliese et al., 2017). Nonetheless, any kind of stress needs to be handled carefully and by the individual and their organizations by providing proper and appropriate support (Michie, 2002). Stress management such as coping strategy are perfect interventions process that can assist in reducing the stress and increasing the occupational health of employees (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008). Thus, results from this study can shed some light on how people cope with challenging situation and identify strategies that may be particularly effective in managing stress and cultivating resilience during this pandemic COVID-19. Therefore, this research will investigate various coping strategies such as problem-focused coping strategies, emotional-focused coping strategies, avoidance-focused coping strategies, and religious-focused coping strategies to reduce stress and increase mental wellbeing among employees in the hotel sector.

Literature review

Mental Wellbeing

Global statistics have shown an increase in cases of psychological stress, anxiety, depression, domestic violent and acts of self-harm during this period (Zakaria, 2020). A report by World Health Organization (WHO) shown that mental wellbeing crisis has become the most significant effect of COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). According to



World Health Organization, mental wellbeing is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (World Health Organization, 2021).

Mental wellbeing was measured by psychological wellbeing and psychological distress (Mirowsky & Ross, 2002). Psychological wellbeing can be defined as a combination of positive emotional states and functioning with optimal effectiveness in individual and social life, while psychological distress is defined as a state of emotional misery characterized by symptoms of depression such as hopelessness, lost interest, and sadness, and anxiety such as feeling tense and restlessness (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Despite a tremendous number of researches regarding mental wellbeing since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, limited studies involved with the coping strategy among employees in tourism and hospitality industries in overcoming the effect of COVID-19 towards mental wellbeing in Malaysia. Chen (2020) for example only assess the psychological distress experienced by employees in the tourism and hospitality industry in United States. Meanwhile Duarte Alonso et al., (2020) explored coping strategies among owners of hospitality firms in 12 countries, while Zheng et al. (2021) investigated coping behaviour of individuals in China towards fear of travel during COVID-19. Bufquin et al., (2021) studied employee work status, mental well-being, and career turnover intentions among restaurant employees during COVID-19. Key stressors of employees in tourism and hospitality industry in China identified by Chen (2020) are unemployment, pandemic-induced panic, and lack of social support. The research found lack of social support gave greatest impacts on the negative well-being of the employees. Chen (2020) found that unemployment, pandemic-induced panic, and lack of social support are the main reason for mental health among tourism and hospitality employees in China. Furthermore, mental health and stress had become an economic burden for Malaysia where RM 14.46 billion had to be borne due to the implications of mental problems in the workplace in 2018 (Zakaria, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic can be precursor to many stressors that may drain employees’ mental health, during and after this pandemic. The distress that an individual feels is only part of the problem, while the consequence of the problem is much greater concern (Mirowsky & Ross, 2002). Therefore, it is important to understand the problem to be able to identify solutions which will help employees and organizations to reduce the risk of mental health issues. However, it is unclear what kind of stressors that affect the hotel sector employees during this pandemic and how they cope with the stressors.

Stressors

Stress can be referred as the extent to which the individual is feeling overwhelmed and not able to deal with unmanageable pressures (Mental Health Foundation, 2020). Meanwhile, work-related stress can be defined as the individuals’ responses when they are being presented with pressures and work demands which are un-matched with their abilities and knowledge that may challenge their coping ability (World Health Organization, 2020). Stress has been deliberately discussed as one of the most significant contributing factor of individual’s mental well-being. According to Bell, Rajendran and Theiler (2012), negative effects of employees’ well-being has been linked to work stress in various jobs, including in the hotel sectors.



Excessive workload, role-conflict, role ambiguity, and work life balance are among those influential stressors for hotel employees (Wen, Zhou, Hu & Zhang, 2020). Having strenuous workload making hotel employees to do job hopping with the hope that the other workplaces will take care of their welfare more than the previous workplace. Besides, role-conflict and role ambiguity which are known as the qualitative influential factor of stress putting the hotel employees in difficult situation when they are given conflicting commands from their superiors and which one that they need to fulfil first. The situation will especially become worse when the employees do not even understand their roles and responsibilities, making the employees to be anxious whether they are doing the right thing in the right way or not. Furthermore, having too much work responsibilities at hand will make the hotel employees to view their work activities and processes as something which are extremely stressful, disabling them to have time for relax. They will have lesser time to be spent with the family, eventually proposing the employees' failure of having work life balance. It is difficult to balance the work demand and life but the imbalance between these two elements may trigger stress which eventually will decrease the productivity of the employees (Bataineh, 2019).

In addition, COVID-19 pandemic has affected the tourism industry when Movement Control Order (MCO) has taken place, resulting in limited number of visitors and tourists who will use the tourism services. Nevertheless, there are hotels that are used as the quarantine centers for COVID-19 and appointed hotel employees will help the medical front-liner with the operational activities of the hotel. Similar to the case of any front-liner, these employees are exposed to the risk of getting COVID-19 as well, making them to work in anxious state of mind. Lack of medical treatment, fear of infection and unreliable vaccine are the main contributing factors of psychological stress among the medical front-liner staff (Cai et al. (2020). These situations may induce new form of stressors towards hotel employees who work with the front-liner at the selected quarantine hotels. These major factors of psychological stress will make the hotel employees to work as if like they are walking on the eggshells as they do not know when they are going to be infected despite of complying with all the required SOPs. In fact, for other hotel employees who are not directly involved with the patients are experiencing fear of losing a job. According to Baum, Mooney, Robinson and Solnet (2020), due to COVID-19, the restructuring and downsizing operations can be a threat to employees as it creates the feelings of job insecurity.

Coping Strategies

Coping is defined as the cognitive and behavioral efforts that individuals use to deal with stressful events (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). When situations are perceived as unpleasant by individuals, they may employ different coping strategies to manage the adverse events or occurrences (Zheng et al., 2021). Schuler defines coping as a process of analysis and evaluation to decide how to protect oneself against the adverse effects of any stress and its associated negative outcomes, and at the same time, take advantage of its positive outcome (Law et al., 1995). There are various coping strategies reported in the literature (Stucky & Hinkebein, 2007), but generally three types of commonly used coping methods are problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-focused coping.

Problem-focused coping aims to manage and reduce the source of threat (e.g., planning, accepting), emotion-focused coping tries to regulate and mitigate the emotional distress caused by the situation (e.g., venting, self-blame) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980), while avoidance-focused coping involves efforts to avoid stressful situations via engaging in a substitute task or seeking out other people (Endler, 1997). Kim and Agrusa (2011) study attempted to find coping

strategies favored by high and low emotional intelligence of employees in hospitality industry revealed that each coping disposition has its unique personality predictors. For problem-focused coping, individuals with emotional intelligence are more persistent; for emotion coping, neuroticism personality; and for avoidance coping, individuals with emotional intelligence, extraversion, and neuroticism.

Although the three types of coping strategies mentioned above are popularly used to measure mental wellbeing, the role of religion is underrepresented in tourism and hospitality research. Thus, one of the objectives of this study is to integrate the religious principle pertaining to coping strategies. Faith or belief influences the way individuals view and relate to God thus religion in general is used to cope with difficult life circumstances. According to Embong et al. (2017), an integrative coping strategy using religion will balance an individual's own efforts for managing stress while seeking help and support from others. Since mental wellbeing is the essence of coping, an understanding of effective coping strategies can aid in attaining the benefits of dealing with mental crisis successfully.

Hypotheses

- H1: There are significant relationships between stressors and mental health of employees in Malaysian hotel sector during COVID-19 pandemic.
- H2: There are significant relationships between stressors and coping strategies (problem-focused; emotion-focused; avoidance-focused; and religion-focused) of employees in Malaysian hotel sector during COVID-19 pandemic.
- H3: There are significant relationship between coping strategies (problem-focused; emotion-focused; avoidance-focused; and religion-focused) and mental wellbeing of employees in Malaysian hotel sector during COVID-19 pandemic.
- H4: Coping strategies mediate the relationship between stressors and mental wellbeing of employees in Malaysian hotel sector during COVID-19 pandemic.

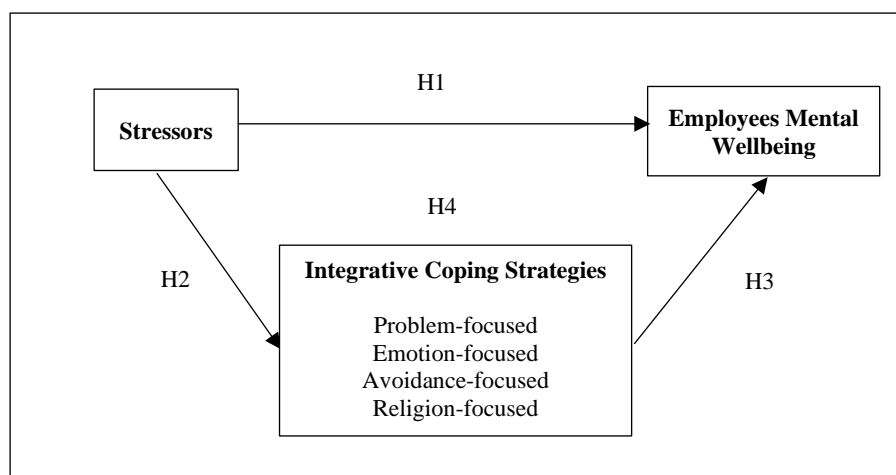


Fig. 2. Stressors and Integrative Coping Strategies for Employees Mental Wellbeing Framework.

Methodology

This study will use the mixed-method research design to collect and analyse data to answer the research questions and eventually achieve the research objectives. The first research question will be answered using semi-structured interviews. The second, third and fourth research question's achievement will be using quantitative design through a cross-sectional field survey.



Field survey is a non-experimental design that measures variables and tests their effects using statistical methods (Bhattacharjee, 2012). This study focusing the hotel sector in the east coast region (Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang). The selection of the east coast region because this region is considered peripheral as it has more rural and less develop areas (Awang, 2006) Thus, this study may reduce the gap between the advanced economy of the west coast and the east coast of Malaysia. In this study, we will be focusing on the four-star hotels and above for the ease of collecting quantitative data. Since many budget hotels (two-star and three-star) were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (S Puvanewary, 2021).

Semi-structured interview will be conducted with managerial and non-managerial employees from three four-star hotels in Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang to gather information on sources of stress (stressors) they are facing in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. The semi-structured interview will various mediums such as face-to-face or online meeting that suit the participants' location and convenience. Then the development of the instrument will be adapted from previous literature and findings from the interview. The questionnaire for this research is created using Google Forms and careful attention will be given in designing the questionnaire, especially in the wording and order of the questions. This strategy will increase response rate and reduce measurement error (Dillman & Wiley, 2007). Interval and ratio scales will be used in preference to nominal and ordinal scales. Although the Likert scale is a popular technique used to measure a wide variety of underlying constructs, scholars disagree if Likert scale represents interval or ordinal data (Sekaran, 2003). Therefore, the items in this research will be measured on a 10-point scale, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (10) strongly agree, which clearly represent interval data. With no middle option, this kind of scale can decrease bias.

In developing a good measurement instrument, a pilot study is required regardless of whether the measures are either newly developed or taken from various sources (Hair et al., 2010). Thus, a pilot study will be conducted in phase three to validate and refine the questionnaire by assessing internal consistency and factor analysis. The pre-test will provide information about deficiencies and suggestions for improving the measure by examining internal consistency reliability, and factor structure (scale dimensionality) of the scale (Hair et al., 2010). This pilot study involves giving survey questionnaire to at least 30 employees in The Grand Renai Hotel, Kota Bharu since respondents for pilot study should be similar to those from the population of the study Hertzog (2008).

Once the research instrument has been validated in phase three, in the fourth phase, data collection will be administered through the online survey. The target unit of analysis of this study is employees in four-star hotel from east coast region (Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang). Kline (2011) indicates a representative sample size in studies where structural equation modeling is used is about 200 cases. While Hair et al. (2010) suggest between 200 to 400 sample sizes for the proper statistical analysis. Therefore, samples of 300 to 350 is considered sufficient for further analysis. Finally, for data analysis, this study will use the Smart Partial Least Squares (PLS) as a causal predictive technique to examine the relationships among the variables and test the hypothesized model.

Conclusion

The continuing crisis of COVID-19 has changed the business model for the tourism sector which imposing the need for various modifications for organizations and individuals to cope up in this testing time. Meanwhile, the well-being of those who are involved in this sector can

be severely affected if they cannot cope with these changes. Good mental wellbeing is essential to sustainable development goals (SDG) and the 2030 agenda reflects the complexity and interconnectedness of the two. The results of this study are important for the government to achieve sustainable growth along with fair and equitable wellbeing. While building a sustainable economy is essential for the wellbeing of the people, development should not only be measured by GDP growth alone but must also consider the social wellbeing indicators and inclusive societal harmony and happiness. Enhance and expand the level of knowledge and awareness on the coping strategies in facing a crisis and eventually improve the quality of life among society in Malaysia specifically employees in the hotel sector.

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