Difference among the Three Generations in COVID-related Stress in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Today, there exists a global critical situation due to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)-CoV-2 viruses, and this has contributed hugely toward increasing levels of stress and worryamonghumansacrossvarious countries. This situation of certain populations being severely affected by the pandemic and their inability to copeis particularly alarming. In the current pandemic crisis, studying the causes of stress in vulnerable populations can be of great value to help alleviate this distressas well as prevent it in the future. This researchtargets at identifying generational differences in their experience of COVID-related stress. A sample of 150 was chosen from Tamil Nadu for this research study through Convenience and Snowball sampling technique. The COVID Stress Scale (CSS) was used to assess the level of COVID-related distress and worry among the respondents. Data was collected by administering the questionnaire online and One-way Analysis of Variance was utilized to examine the difference among the three generations. The results of the research study signify that Generation X undergo lesser COVID stress than Generation Y and Generation Z. The findings of the current research study have substantial implications about the importance of early prevention of the susceptible age groups and age-specific interventions to handle the stress.

Keywords: Age difference; COVID-19; COVID-related stress; Gen X; Gen Y; Gen Z.

Introduction

On 11 March 2020, The World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 as a Pandemic. Till date, there has been 23,14, 99,375 COVID cases around the globe and 47,44,632 deaths due to it. It has been documented worldwide that the spread of the virus and its subsequent events led to a disruption in the mental equilibrium for many. Research study in China revealed that more than 25% of people experienced moderate to severe levels of stress and anxiety in response to COVID-19 (Qiu et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). This increase in the prevalence of stress is related to the factors such as health, employment, familial and other relationships, finance, which may or may not get affected due to a pandemic. In the current research, focus is on COVID-related stress, denoting to the feelings of worry and distress that arises as a result of the presence of virus.

Stress, generally is a part of an individual's experience throughout their life. Young and old end up facingmany difficulties and obstacles due to stress. However, there may be a difference in the kinds of stressors among different age groups (Yiwei Chen, et al., 2018). While young peoplestrive hard to establish a career, acquire financial stability, or achieve work-life balance, older people may face health issues, strive to be generative or trending to children and grandchildren. There are age differences not only in what causes stress, but the stress levels itself. Most of the studies have shown favorable results for older adults, stating they experience lesser stress than younger people (Archer, J. et al, 2015; Thomas. M. et al, 2013; Gallup, 2018; Arthur S. et al, 2017).

In this research study, the aim is to assess the difference between age groups with relation to specifically COVID-related stress. The three generations under examination are Generation X, Generation Y and Generation Z. Thesegenerationallabels serves as a reference point in distinguishing nearly 20 years of attitude, motivations, and historical events. Gen X was born between 1960-1980 and is currently aged between 41 to 60 years. Individualism,

ambition and dedication to work are some of the key characteristics of this generation. Gen Y or Millennialare born between 1981 and 1994 with their current ages being 27-40 years. Also referred to as Digital natives, as technology plays a major role in their lives, they are often known for being lazy, narcissistic and spoilt. In addition to that, in 2014, the Time magazine called themthe "Me-me-me" generation. Finally, Gen Z, which is the latest generation, is born between 1995 till 2010. They are known for theirexpertise in technologies and advocating strongly for social causes on the Internet.

It was previously mentioned that there are many studies investigating the age differences in stress levels. Studies of similar fashion were carried out since the outbreak of COVID to identify the effects of this pandemic on the amount of stress across generations.

In a study by Patrick Klaiber (2021), 776 adults from Canada and United States from age 18 to 91 years answered a survey for a period of one week. The survey covered questions related to daily stressors, positive events and affect. The results revealed that the younger the age, the more concerns about the threat of COVID-19. The current research also showed that older people have better emotional well-being and are less reactivite to stressors, despite there being no difference in the exposure to COVID-related stressors.

IzuNwachukwu (2020) investigated the presence of stress, anxiety and depression among different age groups in Canada during the pandemic period. Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was the tool used to measure stress among 8267 participants. Mean scores on PSS was revealed to be highest among people below the age of 25 years.

Some studies have identified age to be playing a moderating role between the relationships of two factors. Da Jiang (2020) studied dairy entries of 231 participants from 18-85 years of age in China for 14 days. Results reported lower perceived COVID-related stress in older adults. Another finding was that the negative relationship between perceived stress and positive affect was weaker in old adults.

There are several studies that also report higher pathology symptoms among younger people during this pandemic. MalgorzataGambin (2021) studied generalized anxiety and depressive symptoms among various age groups during the lockdown in Poland. Among the 1115 participants that took part (18-85 years), younger adults experienced higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms during the lockdown. In a similar study by Yeen Huang and Ning Zhao (2020), 7236 participants from China took part in a survey. The results were consistent with the previous study, indicating higher prevalence of Generalized Anxiety Disorder and depression symptoms in younger people than older people.

With these studies in mind, one cannot conclude that older people do not get stressed about COVID-19 at all. In fact, WändiBruine (2021) found out that older age was associated with perceived risks of dying due to the virus. There are 6666 participants in this study, ranging from age 18 to 100 years and living in the United States. The interesting finding is that, despite older people's fear of death due to COVID, they have lesser perceived risk of contracting the virus, getting quarantined, financial issues, anxiety and depression.

Mandatory social distancing, lack of privacy inside the house, loneliness from not meeting friends outside and restrictions on travel can be particularly distressing for younger adults, as these may interfere with their sense of autonomy, need for privacy and affiliation. Louise C. Hawkley, PhD of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, stated that older adults, who are isolated, face its challenges every day, not just during the time of a pandemic. In her words, "It doesn't take a pandemic for some older adults to feel what many younger adults are only now appreciating viscerally and emotionally".

Need for the Study:

Studies of earlier pandemics show that stress, or the lack thereof, is an essential driver of behaviour (Taylor, 2019). An optimal level of stress is required for the general public to

practice safety measures. Complete lack of stress would mean dismissal of the virus, refusing to wear masks or practice social distancing, with the belief that they would never contract the virus. However, a higher level of stress is also seen to lead to abnormal behaviors of buying excess of medical supplies, making unnecessary visits to the doctor for trivial reasons, refusing to step outside, etc. An excessive distress about the virus may also disrupt an individual's everyday duties. It occupies most of their thoughts, thereby making it difficult to concentrate on work and other responsibilities. Thus, it is important to investigate the stress levels of the population every now and then, with the existence of the virus still very much relevant. It is also important, however, to identify the factors that exacerbate this worry towards the virus. Previous studies have shown that age does play a role in moderating the stress levels during the pandemic. But this research is unique and exceptional in aiming at identifying generational differences in stress experienced particularly towards the virus, not just general stress levels during the pandemic. Through the results of this research, mental health practitioners and public health officials can come up with interventions that keep in mind the age group that is most susceptible to experiencing distress.

Objective:

To analyze the difference among the three generations in their experience of stress and fear towards COVID.

Hypotheses:

Following null hypothesesis framed:

H1: There will be no significant difference among the three generations in relation to Covid Stress.

H2: There will be no significant difference among the three generations in relation to Danger.

H3: There will be no significant difference among the three generations in relation to Socio-economic Consequences.

H4: There will be no significant difference among the three generations in relation to Xenophobia.

H5: There will be no significant difference among the three generations in relation to Contamination.

H6: There will be no significant difference among the three generations in relation to Traumatic Stress.

H7: There will be no significant difference among the three generations in relation to Compulsive Checking.

Methodology

The research design adopted for carrying out the current research is the Ex-Post Facto design.This research targeted Generation Y, Generation X, and Generation Z population. The sample size was 150 respondents (74 males and 76 females) who were students, employed and unemployed in various vocational streams and careers, across Tamil Nadu. The age range of the participants was from 18 to 60 with a mean age of 33.5.The respondents for the research were selected through Convenience and Snowball sampling.The questionnaire was administered through the online portal, Google Forms. Participants were those who took part in the study voluntarily and the confidentiality of their responses was ensured to them.

Covid Stress Scale (CSS) was developed by Steven Taylor, Caeleigh Landry, Michelle Paluszek, Thomas Fergus, Dean McKay and Gordon Asmundson, to better understand and investigate the distress related to COVID-19. The scale has 6 dimensions namely (1) Danger, (2) Fears about socio-economic consequences, (3) Xenophobia, (4) Contamination fears, (5) Traumatic stress symptoms about COVID-19, and (6) Compulsive checking and reassurance seeking. There are totally 36 items, 6 items in each dimension. The items are responded on a

5-point Likert scale, with 0 (Not at all) to 4 (Extremely) for the first four dimensions, and 0 (Never) to 4 (Almost Always) for the dimensions Traumatic stress and Compulsive checking. The scale was found to be reliable and valid, with a Cronbach alpha of >.80 for all dimensions, which indicates good to excellent reliability.

Statistical analysis:

The data collected was statistically analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). One-way Analysis of Variance was carried out to identify the significant difference between the age groups and Post-Hoc test was performed after finding the significant difference to indicate which group (s) was different.

Table 1

The number of male and female respondents in each Generation

Generations	Age	Male	Female	Total
Generation X	18-26	7	43	50
Generation Y	27-40	32	18	50
Generation Z	41-60	35	15	50

Results

Table 2

One-Way Analysis of Variance in COVID stress and its dimensions among age groups

Measures	df	F	p
Total COVID Stress	149	6.213	0.003**
Danger	149	2.768	0.066

Socio-economic Consequences	149	5.696	0.004**
Xenophobia	149	0.803	0.450
Contamination	149	4.794	0.010**
Traumatic Stress	149	5.694	0.004**
Compulsive Checking	149	7.399	<0.001**

*Note. ** p Significant at 0.01 level*

From Table 2 it is observed that there is a significant difference between the three generations in terms of COVID Stress and all except for two dimensions. Hence hypotheses H1, H3, H5, H6, and H7 are rejected. The results indicate there is no significant difference among age groups in the dimensions of Danger and Xenophobia; hence H2 and H4 is accepted.

Discussion

The results prove that there is a difference among Generations in COVID stress levels and from Post-Hoc Test, Generation X experience significantly lower stress levels than the other two generations. This implies that people from the age of 41 to 60 years old are less stressed about the virus in general. There is also proven to be a significant difference among generations in other dimensions. When it comes to Socio-economic consequences, Generation X experiences significantly lower distress. This means that Generation X does not experience much fear about the demands on their personal and economic resources as a result of the Pandemic. In the next dimension Contamination, Generation Y report significantly higher level of distress than the other two generations. This means that Generation Y fears more about the sources of the virus, including public places, objects like money and surfaces like door handles. Another observation is that, Generation X and Generation Y are significantly different when it comes to Traumatic stress. Generation Y experience more

unwanted intrusive thoughts, nightmares and other symptoms of stress than Generation X does. Finally, in ccompulsive checking, Generation X does have significantly lower levels of constant checking in terms of COVID-related information.

However, it is noted that all three generations do not have a significant difference in the dimensions of Danger and Xenophobia. This means that the groups are not different in their experience of fear of contracting the virus in public places. It also implies that no generation is more xenophobic than the other generations, towards foreigners out of fear that they may carry the virus.

Conclusion

The key findings of the study are:

- Generation X (41-60 year olds) is less stressed about COVID-19 than Generation Y and Z.

- Generation X also is less stressed about the socio-economic consequences and does lesser checking about COVID-related information on social media platforms or with other people.

- Generation Y (27-40 year olds) is more stressed about the dangerousness of the virus, contracting the virus, and is often disturbed by unwanted and upsetting thoughts and emotions about COVID.

- Generation Z (18-26 year olds) is the most stressed about the economic consequences and pressures as a result of COVID.

Implications

Current research has identified the role of age in COVID-related stress. This helps mental health practitioners to take proactive measures aimed at Generation Y and Z, who are more susceptible to COVID stress. Generation X experience lesser amount of stress in relation to the pandemic. This does not mean they do not experience stress at all, which would then lead to reckless and careless behaviors. However, Generation X may have certain protective factors that lessen their burden and distress about COVID and its consequences.

This gives an opportunity for helping professionals to identify those protective factors that older adults may possess, in order to make best use of it and reduce stress. On the other hand, results reveal that the other two generations do undergo immense worry about the virus. Even if it means that these people may engage in safety behaviors, this worry may affect everyday living. Excessive anxiety can also translate into overly-cautious behaviors such as hoarding health supplies or panic buying, frequent and unnecessary visits to hospitals. An added disadvantage is that the object of distress, the virus, cannot be ridden off anytime soon. Thus, helping professionals can come up with age-focused intervention programs that help these two generations to regulate their distress in healthier ways and help turn their distress into eustress. This could include teaching and training appropriate coping skills and relaxation techniques in a way that appeals best to Generation Y and Z. Understanding the roles and responsibilities that each generation specifically carry and how it can play a role in magnifying the stress should also be understood in order to come up with an intervention method. This finding can also be of utmost importance to health care professionals and public health officials in understanding the role of age in the psychological effects of COVID. They can make use of it when it comes to advertising safety protocols in such a way that it does not alarm or worry people, especially Generation Y or when making important decisions regarding lockdown.

Limitations

- The participants predominantly hailed from Urban and Suburban areas only in Tamil Nadu.

- The sampling technique used was Convenience and Snow ball sampling.

- The scale used, Covid Stress Scale (CSS), was not specifically aimed at the Indian population. It was standardised using Canadian and US population.

Scope for further research

- Investigating the gender differences in COVID Stress

- Identifying the causal or predictive factors such as vaccination, domestic abuse, personality, socio-economic status, that results in certain age groups experiencing more COVID-related stress than others.

- Creating intervention programs to reduce COVID stress for particular age groups and testing out its efficiency.

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