

Social interaction anxiety in responding to Covid-19 outbreak in Arabic region

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Abstract

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause diseases that range from the common cold to more severe illnesses such as the Middle East respiratory syndrome and severe acute respiratory syndrome. Novel coronavirus (nCoV) is a new strain affecting humans. Hence, there is a rapid national response to investigate and respond to public health threats promptly. However, the national teams will need updated training to investigate and respond to the nCoV. The coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic can be stressful for people. Fear and anxiety about a new disease and its outcome can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children. Public health measures, such as social distancing, can make people feel isolated and increase stress and anxiety levels. However, these measures are essential to limit the spread of COVID-19. This cross-sectional study assessed the psychological impact of the general population on the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of curfews and closures in the Arab region. We used an online survey distributed via social media apps, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, and the participants were also encouraged to distribute the survey. The study sample consisted of 53% males and 47% females aged 17-64 years, and the majority were between 35-44 years (35%). Among the Arab individuals, most of the study samples were under the cut of point (63.86%). But 33.88% had a mild level of social interaction anxiety in responding to COVID-19.

Key words: COVID-19, Social Interaction Anxiety

Introduction

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause diseases that range from the common cold to more severe illnesses such as the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS-CoV) and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV). Novel coronavirus (nCoV) is a new strain recognised in humans [1].

On 31 December 2019, in Hubei Province, Wuhan, China, a cluster of cases of unidentified pneumonia were reported to the World Health Organization (WHO). Samples were taken from these cases for genetic analysis. In January 2020, the outbreak of a new virus strain called the new coronavirus 2019 was confirmed and was named COVID-19 by the WHO [2]. This COVID-19 was declared as a pandemic in February 2020 by the WHO [3,4].

The first COVID-19 case in the United Arab Emirates was detected on 29 January 2020, and this was the first confirmed case in the Middle East. On Monday, 24 February 2020, Iraq confirmed its first COVID-19 case of an elderly Iranian citizen from the southern city of Najaf. The Egyptian Ministry of Health announced its first case of a Chinese citizen at the Cairo International Airport on 14 February. Saudi Arabia reported its first case on 7 March. Jordan confirmed its primary case on 14 March, and the disease stepped into Syria and Yemen on 22 March and 9 April 2020. The number of cases was rapidly increasing worldwide, and the number of confirmed cases was higher in the United States, Brazil and Russia [5].

COVID-19 pandemic can be stressful for people. Fear and anxiety about a new disease and what might happen can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children. Public health measures, such as social distancing, can make people feel isolated and lonely and increase stress and anxiety. Healthily dealing with stress will make one, the people one care about and their community stronger [6].

With the outbreak of COVID-19 in China during December 2019 and in Europe in February 2020, national opinion polls indicate sharp increases in fear and concerns related to the virus [6]. On the other hand, fear of the unknown is called anxiety, which is the body's natural response to stress [7].

Materials and methods

This cross-sectional study assessed the psychological impact of the general population on the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of curfews and closures in the Arab region. We used an online survey distributed via social media apps, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, and other participants were encouraged to distribute the survey. Physical distribution was not possible due to complete lockdown imposition. Participants received the survey request through WhatsApp groups of colleagues, family or friends. These messages revealed the purpose of the study and a link to participate. The poll was titled "Concern over social interaction in response to the coronavirus outbreak

in the Arab region.” After clicking on the survey link, a cover page appeared explaining the study title, purpose and time required to complete the survey. If interested, one needed to click “Start Survey” and then begin answering the survey.

This study included 668 Arab adults aged between 17–64 years. The survey was conducted online using the data collected over 35 days (June 25 to July 29 2020) using Google Survey Tool (Google Forms; Google LLC, Mountain View, CA, USA). The participants consisted of 53% males and 47% females aged 17–64 years, and (35% of the sample belonged to the age group 35–44 years old. The majority of the study sample had a bachelor's degree (40%). Inclusion criteria: knowledge of the Arabic language as the questionnaire was written in Arabic, Internet use and volunteer response.

Results

Figure 1 showed that the sample majorly contained the age group of 35–44 years (35%).

Figure 3 shows that most of the participants were from Jordan (295) and Iraq (148), and the least participants were from Yemen, Libya and Lebanon (1 each).

Table 1 shows that the mean scores of the sample was high in the Items 18, 7, 12, 20, 10 and 2.

Table 2 revealed that the most of the study sample were under the cut of point (63.86%) and 33.88% of the sample had mild level of social interaction anxiety in responding to COVID-19 among Arab individuals.

Discussion

The study assessed the level of anxiety among the population in Arab countries during the coronavirus pandemic. The study outcomes revealed that 63.86% and 33.88% of the sample had no or mild level of social interaction anxiety, and a significant relationship between the severity of social interaction anxiety, gender and level of education was observed ($P = 0.05$). Majority of the study sample believed that staying at home was the best way to prevent the outbreak of COVID-19. The isolation criteria of social distancing and avoiding crowded places where the spread of the disease increased by coughing or sneezing drops containing the virus such as shopping carts, restaurant tables, doorknobs, and money exchange [8].

The sample responses during the data analysis showed the highest average for Items 18 and 7 (Table 1). A previous study by Wang et al. [9] in China showed that more than a quarter of the participants experienced moderate to severe anxiety symptoms. The women

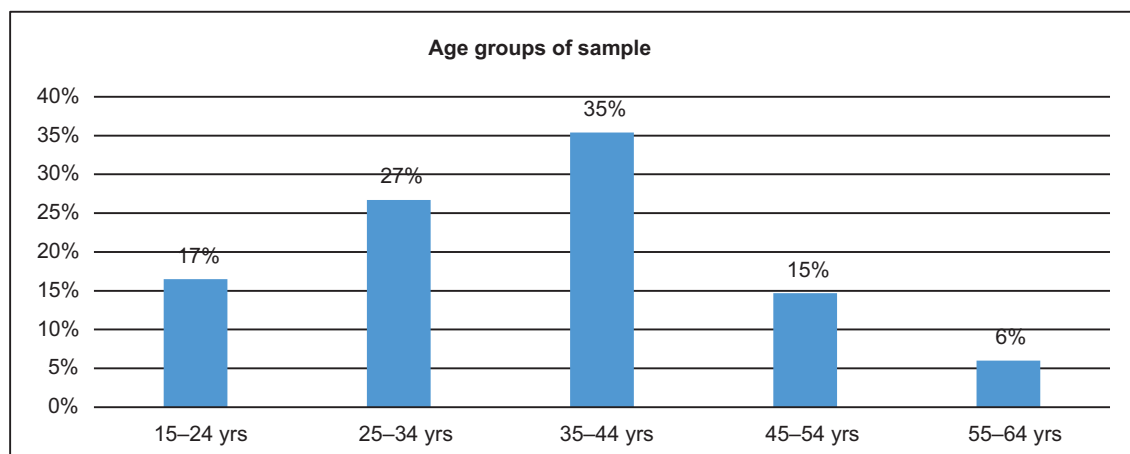


Figure 1: Study sample distribution based on age.

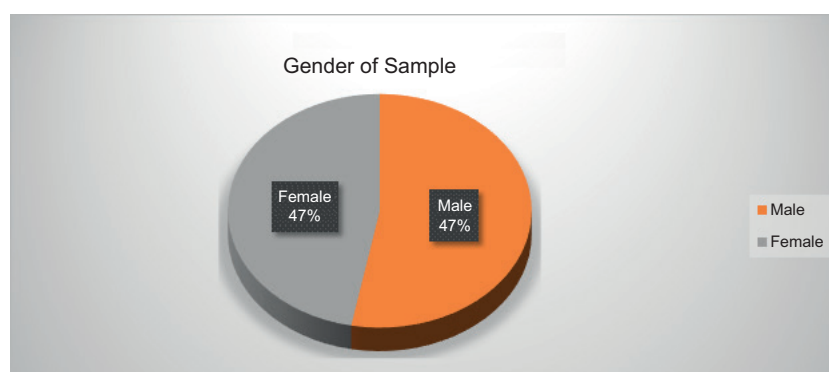


Figure 2: Study sample distribution based on gender.

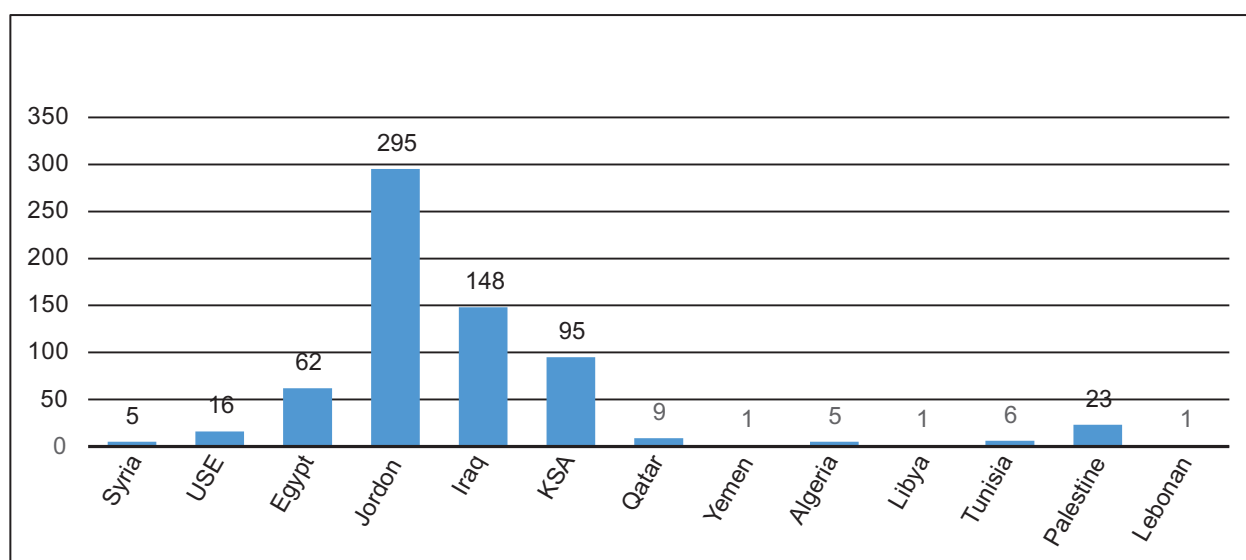


Figure 3: Study sample distribution based on the country of residence.

Table 1: Sample responses in relation to social interaction anxiety-based scale items.

Item number	Items	N	M	SD
18	I find it easy to make friends.	667	2.1265	1.34499
7	I find it easy to think of things to talk about.	667	1.9398	1.25367
2	I am at ease meeting people at parties, etc.	666	1.7143	1.27281
20	I always prefer to be at home.	667	1.7074	1.23104
10	I am nervous mixing with people I don't know well.	667	1.3534	1.16678
2	When mixing socially, I am uncomfortable.	667	1.1820	1.08452
4	I find it difficult to mix comfortably with the people I work with.	665	0.9985	0.99925
81	I have difficulty talking to attractive persons of the opposite sex.	667	0.9760	1.14486
13	I am unsure whether to greet someone I know only slightly.	665	0.9667	0.91392
16	I find it difficult to disagree with another's point of view.	665	0.9669	1.06307
9	I am tense mixing in a group.	666	0.9565	1.04611
6	I feel tensed if I am alone with just one other person.	667	0.9130	1.06187
1	I get nervous if I have to speak with someone.	665	0.8494	0.97087
14	When mixing in a group, I find myself worrying if I will be ignored.	667	0.8100	0.96780
15	I find myself worrying that I won't know what to say in social situations.	667	0.7955	1.00764
11	I feel I'll say something embarrassing when talking.	667	0.7233	0.99931
19	I have difficulty building contact with others.	667	0.7083	1.03653
17	I worry about expressing myself in case I appear awkward.	667	0.6998	0.99034
3	I have difficulty talking with other people.	666	0.6967	0.98769
5	I become tense if I must talk with my friends.	667	0.6491	0.93631

Table 2: Assessment of social interaction anxiety based on cut of point.

Levels of social interaction anxiety	Cut of point	F	P
Lower than cutoff	0–39	426	63.86%
Mild	40–50	226	33.88%
Moderate	51–60	13	1.98%
Sever	61–70	2	0.28%
Extremely	71–80	0	0%
Total	0–80	667	100%

experienced psychological stress, tension, anxiety and depression, which agreed with our study results.

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