

COVID-19 Related Mental Health Effects in the Workplace: A Case of Fast-food Industry in Malaysia

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the fast-food industry adversely. Consequently, the employee's responsibility is expanding, they are stressed over their well-being also in light of

the fact that they are in touch with individuals consistently. This might increase the stress and tension alongside contributing to mental health issues among the employees. However, little attention has been paid to this issue in Malaysia towards a deep understanding of the influential factors. Thus, the goal of this study is to identify the influential factors and the most consequential factor that cause mental health issues among fast food employees in the workplace during pandemics as well as to examine the relationship between the influence factors and fast-food employees' mental health. Quantitative research data has been gathered among 161 fast food workers in Malaysia to determine the workload, job satisfaction, work environment, and salary to deal with employees' mental health. The convenience sampling method was used to select fast food restaurants for the study. Besides, personal contact was used to approach the fast-food workers, who were then snowballed into participating. The data was collected by using a self-administered questionnaire through google form. Then, the data was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Multiple regression was conducted to identify employees' mental health using the aforementioned four variables, and the findings revealed that 52% of the variance in employees' mental health was explained by workload, job satisfaction, work environment, and salary. In addition, the findings gathered from this study indicated a favorable correlation between employees' mental health and both workload and work environment. Meanwhile, researchers found that employees' mental health was weakly positively correlated with both their job satisfaction and their salary. This research attempts to encourage managers in focusing on these four criteria in order to improve employee well-being.

Keywords: COVID-19, fast food employee, mental health, workload, job satisfaction, work environment, salary

Introduction

The fast-food industry, known as Quick Service Restaurants (QSR) has grown dramatically as it dominated over half of the deals in the Food and Beverages (F&B) sector. Fast-food alludes to food that can be served rapidly by virtue of wider options of convenience like counter service, drive-through, take away, and deliveries. Fast-food also is well known in light of the fact that the food is convenient, reasonable price, and tastes great. In Malaysia, fast-food industry has grown to be the most popular choice for many people due to its ability to prepare meals quickly and serve them to consumers quickly. As a result, Malaysia's food business has been able to expand its operations and adapt to the evolving lifestyles of customers (Xiao, Yang & Iqbal, 2019).

After the COVID-19 struck the entire world, every country encountered a slumping economy just like the F&B sector. This has affected the fast-food industry significantly. Dine-in is strictly not permitted during the quarantine time frame. For example, 24-hour fast food restaurants like McDonald's are only open for takeaway, deliveries, and drive-through, while their business hours are limited by 9 pm to prevent people from going out around at night in order to reduce the spreading of the outbreak. Even though the fast-food industry has to adhere to standard operating procedures (SOP), these large corporations need to continue to operate and retain their employees. As per the Prime Minister's statement, Malaysia's

economy faced huge damage as a result of the economy's poor performance (Kee et al., 2021). As a result, it gives a huge impact on the fast-food industry as well as the employees themselves. Eatery duties are usually mentally exhausting, also employees claimed that their mental health has been affected badly in recent years.

Several employees state that they do not deserve those psychological tensions plus the risk of infection (Shen, 2021). Thus, the fast-food workers are the ones who suffer mentally and have to sacrifice their health as front-liners who every day need to serve the customers. This emphasises the fear of highly risking the COVID-19 while working beneath inappropriate welfare, incompatible pay, and working hours, which added to job-related tension (Lippert, Furnani & Kriebel, 2021). This gives much stress especially when there is a shortage of labour and they need to work extra hours which really gives such a huge workload and lack of rest. Therefore, the increasing concern is likely to raise the employee turnover rate during this pandemic, at once, might stunt the fast-food industry as well as economic growth.

Thus, the specific objectives of the study are:

- 1) To identify the influential factors that cause mental health issues among fast-food employees in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2) To determine the most influential factor that causes mental health issues among fast-food employees in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3) To examine the relationship between the influence factors towards fast food employees' mental health.

Literature Review

Mental Health

World Health Organisation (WHO) stated that health is defined as more than just the absence of disease; rather, it refers to a state that comprises not only the absence of disease but also the presence of cognitive and emotional flourishing. In the meantime, Policy Mental Health 2012 defines mental health as the ability of individuals, groups, and an environment to interact with one another in order to optimally enhance subjective well-being and the utilisation of cognitive, affective, and relational talents in order to achieve individual and group goals. In other words, mental health is the ability to interact with one another in order to optimally enhance subjective well-being and the utilisation of cognitive, affective, and relational talents.

The state of one's mental health has the potential to have an effect on how they think, how they behave, and how they feel. The degree to which a person's mental health is healthy affects the decisions and choices they make in life, the ways in which they overcome challenges, and the relationships they have with other people. As a result of an increase in the number of suicides that are being publicized in the media, the mental health of Malaysians is currently in a perilous position. There are a number of key factors that have contributed to the situation, including the economic crisis, high unemployment rates, high job stress, problems within families, and problems with the environment.

Midway through the year 2021, the Malaysian Ministry of Health (MOH) made the announcement that 91.2 percent of more than 100,000 calls received from psychological support helplines need some form of emotional support and counselling. The issue of suicide is taboo in the country and is rarely discussed in public; nevertheless, the significant spike in instances across all races, which is believed to be linked to the breakout of COVID-19, has pushed all parties to open their eyes to the problem. Even if the epidemic has not abated, the overwhelming number of people have been exhausted from having to deal with the problems given by COVID-19 ever since the beginning of 2020 in regards to their capability to live.

Workload

Mental health issues can be exacerbated by long work shifts and heavy workloads that exceed a person's physical capabilities. In addition to the predicament that has arisen, because of the onset of COVID-19, workers in Malaysia have been driven to put in more hours in order to make ends meet and keep up with the rising cost of living. The shift in the work culture that occurred as a direct result of the COVID-19 infection added additional stress to the lives of employees who had already had to put in long hours in order to maintain their standard of living. In recent years, it has become common practice for employees in Malaysia to put in extra hours at their places of employment in order to bring in a supplementary income. According to Blanco, Pasco, and Tus (2021), the stress that the work puts on the service workers is beyond what they are able to handle at this point.

It is due to the environment, which consists of a substantial amount of work and a substantial number of people who need to be served. In addition, because their work now involves a significant amount of verbal interpretation, service personnel frequently find themselves emotionally drained as a result of the demands of their jobs. The number of hours that employees were required to work and the money they received were both decreased as a direct result of the reduced staffing and seating capacity. On the other hand, the employees' workload increased as a corresponding result of additional cleaning and safety precautions (Lippert, Furnani & Kriebel, 2021). In addition to the ambiance, diners are now paying more attention than ever before to the efforts made to maintain sanitation and the safety precautions that are in place. And this heightened awareness contributes to the stress levels of both restaurant workers and diners themselves, even if it is only a subconscious effect.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a person's feelings and thoughts regarding their current position. Severe satisfaction and extreme discontent can exist on the spectrum of job satisfaction. Employees have views not only regarding their employment in general but also about particular aspects of their jobs. These attitudes might be positive or negative. People are also able to have attitudes regarding other aspects of their jobs, such as the kind of work they do, the co-workers they interact with, the superiors or subordinates they report to, and the salary they receive. (George & Jones, 2008). As a result, those who are dissatisfied with their occupations are likely to exhibit undesirable attitudes or behaviour at work, which can lead to a sense of frustration. Even yet, employees who are happy in their professions are more productive, active, and passionate in their work than those who aren't satisfied.

Meanwhile, fast food employees are facing the issue because of pandemics which as well as impact their mental health. According to Lippert, Furnani, and Kriebel (2021), participants highlighted wages and benefits, as well as scheduling and paid time off as their main concerns. In addition, participants reported lower incomes, more irregular compensation, and fewer hours worked as a direct result of limited seating capacity. These issues emerged as a result of the pandemic; everything is messed up as a result of adherence to SOPs, which forces the management line to take severe action in order to deal with the crisis while jeopardising employee welfare. Low-wage food service and preparation workers will be adversely affected by job instability or a reduction in working hours and wages due to their low compensation (Gangopadhyaya & Waxman, 2020).

Work Environment

The word "work environment" refers to the settings in which an employee is able to perform his or her duties. In addition, the atmosphere of an office is affected by factors such as the building's physical condition, the availability of healthy working conditions, and the interactions between employees. The setting in which workers perform their jobs has an impact not just on their physical health but also on their mental health. Employee satisfaction and productivity can both benefit from a positive work environment. Employers and employees alike benefit from these arrangements. COVID-19's existence has harmed the working atmosphere for the workers due to the current global crisis. They are concerned about their health and fear that they may be a carrier of the disease.

Due to the high volume of people, they come into touch with on a daily basis, employees at retail establishments, bars, restaurants, fast food chains, and food delivery services have an increased risk of contracting an infection from those around them (Burdorf, Porru & Rugulies, 2020). Meanwhile, more than a third of all fast-food workplaces had more than 20 employees, indicating the presence of shared facilities such as workstations, restrooms, and rest facilities. Cooks, for example, have seen the greatest increase in mortality of any occupation during the pandemic (Huang et al., 2021).

Salary

Salary can be defined as month-to-month or annual payment from a hirer to their workers, although is most typically paid monthly. A hired employee is paid a predetermined sum of money at the end of each pay period. In countries where healthcare coverage is not universal, they receive paid leave and statutory holidays, as well as other benefits. As far as salary is concerned, the financial turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is difficult for many workers to deal with, causing the vast majority of workers who receive pay cuts at this time to intend to find new jobs. According to Lippert, Furnani, and Kriebel (2021) due to low earnings, participants had a difficult time juggling their many commitments. While many families are struggling to make ends meet and some parents are considering financial distress in the face of ongoing financial difficulties.

As a result of the COVID-19 situation, worldwide mental health is suffering. Mental issues were linked to concerns about salary, job, education, or debt in China. Symptoms of

depression worsened over time as a consequence of lost earnings and financial hardship, which was distinct from pandemic-related worry. The mental health of people all around the world is suffering from a variety of stressors at the moment (Li et al., 2020). Fast food workers are struggling with wage reductions in this pandemic era since their commitment remains constant, but they are unable to meet all of their commitments because of the declining payment.

Methodology

Due to the complex linkages between mental health and its independent elements; workload, job satisfaction, work environment, and salary, a quantitative approach was utilized between March and June 2022 to gain a thorough understanding of this topic. A link to an online survey was shared on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, among other online forums, in order to attract volunteers from the online community for this study. The sampling frame for the study consisted of fast-food restaurants located throughout Malaysia. Additionally, both part-time and full-time employees were invited to participate in the survey. Fast food establishments were selected for the study using the method of convenient sampling. Utilizing a Google form, the survey was constructed. On the first page, information about the participants was presented. Eligible participants had access to the research questionnaire, and their replies were collected in confidence.

The poll link was distributed via multiple channels, including SMS, WhatsApp, and social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. This study was conducted utilizing a questionnaire that had been created specifically for the purpose. The survey utilized three instruments with extensive investigation. Eight-item scale used to measure workload includes growing workloads, a lack of control over the work, and the necessity to finish tasks rapidly (De Bruin & Taylor, 2006). In the meanwhile, an eight-item scale was utilized to assess job satisfaction, including supervisor support, management, training, and assistance (Wang et al., 2017). Next, a scale of eight items is used to evaluate the workplace environment, including the danger of infection, the safe environment, and the interaction between coworkers (Sulastiningtyas & Nilasari, 2019) and (Ruiz-Frutos et al., 2020). A scale of eight items is used to measure salary, including pay decrease, pay structure, and salary satisfaction (Edakhlon et al., 2021) and (Habib et al., 2018). Each of these instruments collected responses using a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree" as the highest results. The tools' dependability has also been subjected to a reliability test. After preliminary testing, improvements were made to the questionnaire.

Results and Findings

Sample selection used a 95 percent probability with a 5 percent confidence range. Data from 161 participants, a sizeable enough sample to be considered representative. Data collection took place between March and June of 2020. The survey consisted of 41 questions, each graded on a 5-point Likert scale, on variables such as mental health, workload, job satisfaction, work environment, and salary. The researcher took into account the shifts in a variety of demographic information, such as gender, race, age, department, job title, etc.

Table 1. Respondent Demographic Profile

Variables	Demographic characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	<20 years	11	6.8
	20-29 years	127	78.9
	30-39 years	23	14.3
	40-49 years	-	-
	>50 years	-	-
Gender	Male	39	24.2
	Female	122	75.8
Race	Malay	134	83.2
	Chinese	15	9.3
	Others	12	7.5
Department	Front of the house	94	58.4
	Back of the house	67	41.6
Work Position	Managerial line	34	21.1
	Non managers	121	75.2
	Owner	2	1.2
	Other	4	2.5
Current Position	Full-time	74	46
	Part-time	73	45.3
	Contract	11	6.8
	Other	3	1.9
Fast Food Restaurant	McDonald's	61	37.9
	KFC	17	10.6
	A&W	6	3.7
	Burger King	9	5.6
	Marrybrown	15	9.3
	Domino's	18	11.2
	Texas Chicken	14	8.7
	Other	21	13
Work Experience	<6 months	54	33.5
	6-12 months	49	30.4
	1-2 years	34	21.1
	3-4 years	18	11.2
	5-7 years	4	2.5
	>8 years	2	1.2
State	Johor	8	5
	Kedah	14	8.7
	Kelantan	5	3.1
	Melaka	3	1.9
	Negeri Sembilan	6	3.7
	Pahang	13	8.1

Perak	11	6.8
Perlis	2	1.2
Pulau Pinang	11	6.8
Sabah	3	1.9
Sarawak	-	-
Selangor	55	34.2
Terengganu	-	-
Kuala Lumpur	24	14.9
Labuan	-	-
Putrajaya	6	3.7

75.8 percent of the 161 participants were female and 24.2 percent were male; in terms of age, there were comparatively youthful workers in their 20s (78.9%). The majority of the participants (83.2 %) are Malay. Over half of the participants (58.4%) worked under the department in front of the house (FOH) meanwhile the remaining, 41.6%, worked under the department at the back of the house (BOH). As for the work position, a large portion of participants (75.2%) are non-managers. Besides, for the current position, full-time workers make up a large percentage which is 46% followed by part-time workers (45.3%). While others in work position and current position are internship students. The majority of the participants (37.9%) are from McDonald's followed by Domino's and KFC with respectively 11.2% and 10.6%. Most of the participants (33.5%) worked in the foodservice industry for less than 6 months, followed by 30.4% of them working in the foodservice industry between 6 to 11 months. Lastly, the majority of respondents live in Selangor with a percentage of 34.2, while there are no respondents from Sarawak, Terengganu and Wilayah Persekutuan Labuan.

Identification of the Most Influential Factor that causes Mental Health Issue Among Fast-food Employees

A multiple regression analysis was done to examine the most influential factor that impacts employees' mental health. Table 2 shows that R-value is 0.721. This shows that workload, job satisfaction, work environment, and salary are all strongly correlated with mental health. Meanwhile, the R^2 value is 0.520. This indicates that workload, job satisfaction, work environment, and salary contribute for 52% of the variance in mental health.

Table 2. Model Summary

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.721 ^a	.520	.508	.520

Table 4 indicates that job satisfaction does not significantly influence the employee's mental health because the sig-t were 0.449 which is more than alpha value. This signifies that workload is the most influential factor that causes mental health issues among fast food employees followed by work environment with respectively beta value: 0.614, sig-t: 0.000 and beta value: 0.197, sig-t: 0.007.

Table 4. Coefficient

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
(constant)	.156	.311		.502	.616
Workload	.760	.081	.614	9.360	.000
Job Satisfaction	.082	.107	.057	.759	.449
Work Environment	.313	.114	.197	2.757	.007
Salary	-.163	.073	-.162	-2.234	.027

Relationship between Possible Factors and Employees' Mental Health.

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the association between workload, job satisfaction, work environment and salary in the mental health field. Workload was more strongly positively related to mental health with the r-value of .696; $p < 0.01$. Besides, r-value for work environment was .488; $p < 0.01$ which indicates an intermediate positive relationship with employee's mental health. Meanwhile, job satisfaction and salary have very low positives related to mental health. This signifies that there is strong positive association between workload and employee's mental health followed by work environment which is moderate positive relationship. To estimate the correlations of the factors' associations, Pearson Correlation analysis is carried out and the results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Pearson Correlation

		Mental health	Workload	Job Satisfaction	Work Environment	Salary
Mental health	Pearson Correlation	1	.696**	.166*	.488**	.080
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.036	.000	.313
Workload	Pearson Correlation	.696**	1	.207**	.532**	.217**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.009	.000	.006

Job Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	.166*	.207**	1	.432**	.636**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.036	.009		.000	.000
Work Environment	Pearson Correlation	.488**	.532**	.432**	1	.371**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
Salary	Pearson Correlation	.080	.217**	.636**	.371**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.313	.006	.000	.000	

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

Conclusion

This study met all three of its objectives, which were to identify and determine factors affecting Malaysian fast food workers' mental health. This research first objective showed that workload, job satisfaction, work environment, and salary affect fast food restaurant workers' mental health. Fast food workers were overworked, which could explain the workload. A previous study found that overworked workers had the highest rate of negative health symptoms (Shultz, Wang & Olson, 2010). This supports Shultz, Wang, and Olson (2010), who found that the number of overworked employees is too high. Productivity, motivation, and satisfaction are linked to occupational mental health. However, occupational mental health is strongly linked to job satisfaction. Job satisfaction has been linked to fewer mental and psychological health issues, including a meta-analysis. This suggests that this study's findings are similar to Faragher, Cass, and Cooper (2005), which suggests that job dissatisfaction may affect mental health. In the workplace, this finding is similar to recent studies from the US (Lee et al., 2020) and Iran (Ahorsu et al., 2020) that found fear of coronavirus to be a major predictor of psychological distress in adults. The coronavirus was also linked to suicidal thoughts, alcohol use, and hopelessness in a large portion of the population concerned about it (Lee, 2020a). Finally, in terms of salary, this study found a weak positively correlation, which is consistent with Harikripahai Organisation (2007), which found that fast food workers have been mistreated, particularly in terms of pay, affecting their ability to care for their families. This may explain crisis stress.

Research objective two was to determine the main cause of employee mental health issues using Multiple Regression analysis. The multiple regression analysis showed that workload, job satisfaction, work environment, and salary explained 52% of the variance in fast food restaurant employees, and the predictions were reasonable and accurate. Workload caused the most mental health issues in Malaysian fast-food workers, with Beta value of 0.614 and p-value of 0.000. Thus, Malaysian fast-food companies can focus on workload and mental health to reduce employee turnover.

Finally, Pearson Correlation analysis addressed research objective three. All four parameters positively correlated with mental health. Workload was the strongest predictor of mental health ($r= 0.696$, $p<0.01$), followed by work environment. Job satisfaction and salary weakly improve mental health ($r= 0.166$, $p>0.01$) and ($r= 0.080$, $p>0.01$). Previous studies found that COVID-19 pandemic participants worked longer than usual. Overworked workers may lack the energy to cope. Work overload occurs when a person has too many demands, not enough time to complete work, or feels understaffed and under pressure. Hülshager, Walkowiak, and Thommes (2018) and Reynolds (2018) found similar results (2020). In this case, reducing the workload is better than dealing with the stress.

Recommendation and Implication

The researchers recognized some limitations in this study. The research began with Malaysian fast-food workers. Because some states had no respondents, frequency distributions are not well distributed. Next, the research cannot be generalised because it only includes a small percentage of Malaysian fast-food workers. Thirdly, this research only considers job-related, organisational, and environmental factors. However, the other key elements may be ignored. The results may be insightful but not conclusive. This research also analyses managerial line and non-managerial employment status, which may affect its accuracy. Their mental health may differ from non-management employees due to their responsibilities. Despite the surveys' widespread distribution on social media, this research's response collection took a long time. Thus, limited data may affect results. A larger research population may improve statistical analysis for all variables. Future researcher may utilize a mixed method approach to obtain a more meaningful result. Other mental health factors may also be studied, since other unexplored factors may have contributed to mental health issues. Finally, future research should distinguish between management and non-managerial positions because their duties and scope differ. It helps pinpoint the issue.

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