

COVID-19, Technology, and Stress Among Graduate Employees: Navigating Challenges in the Modern Work Environment

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Abstract: The bidirectional relationship between stress and disease is a well-established phenomenon, where diseases can induce stress, and conversely, stress can contribute to the onset of diseases. The COVID-19 pandemic, recognized as a global health crisis, induced widespread panic among people worldwide. This empirical study seeks to examine the extent of stress experienced by graduates in technical and management fields during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings indicate significant alterations in the work patterns of these graduates, affecting both those who contracted the virus and those who did not. Both groups reported changes in sleep, living conditions, and eating habits, leading to notable levels of stress. Interestingly, these alterations were prevalent irrespective of COVID-19 infection status. The observed changes in stress levels during the pandemic were predominantly mild to moderate. Additionally, the heightened work-related stress during COVID-19 correlated with emerging health issues, including sensations of heaviness in limbs, fever accompanied by cough, and fluctuations between hot and cold spells, contributing to sustained stress and anxiety among the participants.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, causes, consequences, stress, changes in the level of work stress, health problems, Technology.

Introduction

COVID-19 stands out as the deadliest pandemic in the past century. While recent decades have witnessed various endemics and severe disasters, their impacts have generally been confined to specific regions. In contrast, the distinctive feature of COVID-19, and its rapid transmission, compelled people worldwide to restrict themselves within their homes. The World Health Organization (WHO) had to issue guidelines to mitigate the spread and the associated adverse effects of the virus. In the initial phases, the WHO expressed concerns about the physical and psychological well-being of individuals. Nations took prompt measures to curb the spread, with the implementation of lockdowns being a significant step. This lockdown, possibly the most extensive in recorded history, has profoundly altered the lives of people globally. The pervasive fear of COVID-19 as a highly lethal disease has led individuals to perceive it as a serious threat to their lives. The pandemic has resulted in numerous fatalities, causing profound grief and loss for many who have lost loved ones. Some who contracted the virus and recovered even viewed their experience as akin to a rebirth. Living with the disease in quarantine has been widely regarded as a harrowing and challenging ordeal.

In their efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19, governments worldwide have implemented stringent

measures, halting not only domestic but also international travel. Among the most severely affected groups are migrant laborers, who faced significant challenges due to complete lockdowns and travel restrictions. In some countries, domestic migrants resorted to walking long distances to reach their native places, while immigrant workers encountered substantial hardships in returning to their home countries. The impact of COVID-19 has been universal, affecting individuals regardless of their economic status or the economic standing of their countries. Both immigrants and domestic out-migrants encountered numerous restrictions in their home countries, ostensibly implemented as protective measures against the virus. Regrettably, these measures were perceived as a form of severe mistreatment by friends and relatives, highlighting the pervasive challenges posed by the pandemic.

The fluctuating trajectory of COVID-19 cases has led people to perceive its spread as occurring in waves. Moreover, over a relatively brief span of approximately two years, the virus has undergone notable changes in its form and structure, marked by mutations such as the transition from COVID-19 Alpha to the Delta variant and further to the Omicron variant. As these mutations persist, varying opinions have emerged, especially within the medical and health communities, regarding the nature and impact of the new and emerging strains. Some assert that the SARS-CoV is gaining strength with each transformation, assuming different forms, while others argue that a series of mutations may diminish the virus's

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capacity to infect and mitigate its potential for causing severe health consequences in human beings.

All these advancements in the COVID-19 pandemic have emerged as a considerable cause for concern and a stressor, affecting not only those directly afflicted by the disease but also individuals who have managed to evade infection. The aftermath of COVID-19 on the health condition of those who were infected is recognized as a noteworthy and serious issue, particularly amid reports indicating a decline in the health status of individuals experiencing recurrent infections. Across the globe, countries have implemented comprehensive measures to address affected individuals, employing various available medications and deploying strategies to curb further transmission. International research institutions and laboratories have undertaken robust research and development initiatives, resulting in the creation of highly effective vaccines with reported efficacy rates ranging from 90% to 96%, designed to safeguard the population from the pandemic. In India, a commendable initiative involves the free distribution of vaccines, with over 200 crore doses already administered and booster doses were also being administered to bolster immunity against the virus. While these collective efforts have notably contained the spread of the disease, it is acknowledged that the virus persists in certain pockets of the country, taking on the form of an endemic in India. People do believe that the impact of COVID-19 may remain for some more time.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Stress is an inherent aspect of human life, a universally experienced phenomenon that affects individuals and organizations alike. In contemporary times, no individual or organization can assert complete freedom from stress, as it becomes a common experience for everyone at certain points in their lives. While numerous studies have identified various stress triggers, diseases emerge as a significant causative factor, particularly due to their association with the psychological well-being of individuals. When individuals are afflicted by diseases, a natural response is heightened nervousness and the development of an insecurity feeling, contributing to severe mental stress.

The Novel Coronavirus, with its unique capability to rapidly spread and significantly impact vital organs, particularly the lungs, has emerged as one of the most fatally destructive viruses in recent times. Beyond the virus's lethal nature, the measures implemented by governments to curb its spread are also perceived as capable of instilling fear universally. General lockdowns, strict quarantines, complete restrictions on movement, limited understanding on the mode of disease's

transmission, and related factors induce constant fear and anxiety among the populace. Fear and anxiety, widely recognized as the primary causes of stress, are exacerbated by the unprecedented circumstances created by the virus and the stringent measures imposed to mitigate its effects.

Fears and anxieties apart the implementation of a complete lockdown as a measure to contain the spread, left a significant portion of the population unemployed. Daily wage earners, in particular, faced desperate circumstances, nearly losing their means of livelihood. Employers found themselves in the challenging position of supporting their workforce despite the inability to utilize their services in production and other business activities. These factors are believed to have contributed to a pervasive sense of insecurity among both employees and employers. However, amidst the widespread job losses, a notable segment of the workforce known as front-line workers continued to work and perform their roles. Engaged in essential services such as health, sanitation, and hospitality, these individuals continued to work during the challenging times of the pandemic, often at the risk of their own lives. Front-line workers were permitted to carry out their duties with necessary precautionary measures in place, including travel from home to the workplace and back. Another crucial workforce that remained active during the pandemic included those responsible for supplying groceries, food items, and other essentials, maintaining their work routines despite the prevailing critical circumstances.

Despite a plethora of studies conducted and published during the pandemic, there is a noticeable scarcity of research exclusively focusing on job stress among the engineering and management graduates who actively worked during this challenging period, especially in this specific region of Tamil Nadu. This gap in existing literature prompted the initiation of the present study.

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives.

1. To ascertain the causes and consequences of stress among the engineering and management graduates during the pandemic; and
2. To assess the perceived job stress levels and changes in the stress levels on account of Corona virus pandemic.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are framed to test empirically.

Ho1: There is no significant differences in the nature of work done by the Engineering and Management graduates in the pre and post COVID-19 situation.

Ho2: There is no significant differences in the infection status between Engineering and Management graduates.

Ho3: There is no significant differences in the views of the Engineering and Management graduates regarding the changes in the level of stress in the COVID-19 situation.

Methodology

This is an empirical study. It employs purposive sampling technique. A total of 120 samples were selected

Analysis and Interpretation

for this research, drawn from the pool of engineering and management graduates actively employed in the food supply and hospitality industry throughout the pandemic. Data were collected through interviews using a structured schedule containing pertinent questions related to the subject under study. The analysis involved the application of relevant statistical tools, with the study utilizing the chi-square test to test hypotheses formulated for the research based on the objectives.

Table 1 Profile of the Graduates

Details	No. of Respondents (N=120)	Percentage
Age (in years)		
18 to 25	24	20
26 to 30	32	27
31 to 35	36	30
36 and above	28	23
Marital Status		-
Married	79	66
Unmarried	41	34
Family Size		-
0 to 2	39	33
3 to 4	28	23
5 +	53	44
Educational Qualification		-
BE	54	45
ME	0	-
MBA	49	41
BE MBA	17	14
Work Experience (in years)		-
1-5	63	53
6-10	44	37
10+	13	11

Source: Compiled from the field data collected during Feb. and March 2022.

The respondents comprising 120 engineering and management graduates in the food supply and hospitality industry, represent a diverse demographic profile. The age distribution reveals that a notable proportion of the respondents fall in the 26 to 30 age group (27%),

followed by the 31 to 35 age group (30%). Marital status indicates that two third majority (66%) of respondents are married, and family size varies, with 33% having 0 to 2 members, 23% having 3 to 4 members, and 44% having 5 or more members. In terms of educational

qualifications, 45% hold a Bachelor of Engineering (BE), 41% have a Master of Business Administration (MBA), and 14% possess both BE and MBA qualifications. Regarding work experience, about 53% have 1 to 5 years, 37% have 6 to 10 years, and 11% have 10 or more years of work experience.

It could be inferred from the above that the diverse demographic characteristics and work experience of the surveyed engineering and management graduates present potential implications for job stress within the food

supply and hospitality industry during the pandemic. Marital and family status variations may contribute to distinct stressors among individuals, with those having additional family responsibilities potentially experiencing different job-related challenges. The mix of educational qualifications suggests a multifaceted workforce with varied skill sets, potentially influencing the dynamics of job stress. Further research is warranted to delve deeper into the correlation between these demographic factors and the experience of job stress among this specific group of professionals.

Table 2 Nature of Work Done Before and During Pandemic

Details	No. of Respondents (N=120)	Percentage
Nature of work done before pandemic		-
Production industry	32	27
Marketing	51	43
Admin works	14	12
Other services	23	19
Nature of work done during the pandemic		-
Production industry	11	9
Marketing	68	57
Admin works	06	5
Other services	35	29
Chi- square value	18.36714	
P value	0.000369	

Source: Compiled from the field data collected during Feb. and March 2022.

In this study encompassing 120 respondents, a significant shift in the nature of work before and during the pandemic is observed. Before the pandemic, a substantial proportion of respondents were engaged in marketing (43%), followed by production industry roles (27%), other services (19%), and administrative works (12%). During the pandemic, a notable change occurred, with the majority involved in marketing roles (57%), followed by other services (29%), production industry (9%), and administrative works (5%). The chi-square value of 18.36714 and the associated p-value being 0.000369, it is stated that a statistically significant association is seen between the nature of work before and during the pandemic.

The findings indicate a marked adaptation in the nature of work among respondents in the face of the pandemic. The substantial increase in marketing roles during the pandemic aligns with the evolving business landscape, emphasizing the heightened importance of marketing activities, likely driven by shifts in consumer behavior and increased reliance on online platforms. The statistically significant association, as indicated by the chi-square test, emphasizes the impact of the pandemic on the significant changes in the occupational roles. These inferences underscore the dynamic nature of work, necessitating a rapid response to changing circumstances, particularly in fields like marketing, to meet the evolving needs of industries during the pandemic.

Table 3 COVID 19 Infection Status of the Respondents

Infection Status	Engineering	Management	Both	Total
Affected	22 (18)	19 (16)	6 (5)	47 (39)
Not affected	32 (27)	30 (25)	11 (9)	73 (61)
Total	54 (45)	49 (41)	17 (14)	120 (100)
Chi- square value	0.166301			
P value	0.920212			

Source: Compiled from the field data collected during Feb. and March 2022.

The data presented here pertains to the infection status of respondents categorized by their academic backgrounds, specifically in engineering and management. Among the engineering graduates, 45% (54 individuals) were surveyed, with 18% (22 individuals) reporting being affected by the infection. Among management graduates, constituting 41% (49 individuals), 16% (19 individuals) reported being affected. Additionally, 14 individuals from both engineering and management backgrounds were included, accounting for 14% of the sample. The chi-square value is 0.166301, and the associated p-value is 0.920212, suggesting that there is no statistically significant association between infection status and academic background.

The analysis of infection status of the graduate employees with engineering and management backgrounds indicates a relatively balanced distribution between those affected and those not affected. The absence of a statistically significant association, as evidenced by the chi-square test and p-value, suggests that the likelihood of being affected by the infection is not significantly influenced by one's academic background (being either engineering or management). These findings suggest the equitable distribution of infection among the surveyed groups. The research findings have been emphasizing the importance of considering broader factors beyond academic disciplines in understanding and addressing the impact of the COVID-19 infection.

Table 4 Common Symptoms of Respondents Infected of Covid-19

Common Symptoms of Pandemic	No. of Respondents (N=47)	Percentage
Fever with cough	40	86
Throat infection	36	76
Stomach pain	11	23
Stomach upset	18	39
General weakness	46	97
Breathing trouble	6	13

Source: Compiled from the field data collected during Feb. and March 2022.

The respondents, totalling 47 individuals, were surveyed regarding common symptoms experienced by them during the pandemic. Fever with cough emerged as the most prevalent symptom, reported by a substantial 86% of the respondents. Throat infection was also common, with 76% experiencing this symptom. General weakness was overwhelmingly prevalent, affecting 97% of the respondents. Stomach upset and stomach pain were reported by 39% and 23% of individuals, respectively, while breathing trouble was the least commonly reported symptom, affecting 13% of the respondents.

The findings from Table 4 highlight the prevalence of specific symptoms among the surveyed individuals during the pandemic. Fever with cough, throat infection, and general weakness were predominant symptoms experienced by a majority of respondents. These common symptoms match with well-documented manifestations of viral respiratory infections. The lower prevalence of stomach-related symptoms and breathing trouble indicates a potential variation in the symptomatology experienced by the surveyed group.

Table 5 Causes of Stress as Reported by the Respondents during the Pandemic

Causes of the Stress	No. of Respondents					
	Infected (47)		Not Infected (73)		Total (120)	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Change in living conditions	43	91	67	92	110	92
Change in sleeping habits	45	96	70	96	115	96
Change in eating habits	41	87	69	95	110	92
Change in the health of self	47	100	38	52	85	71
Change in the health of other family members	38	81	56	77	94	78
Death of spouse	6	13	4	5	10	8
Death of family members	2	4	0	-	2	2
Death of close friends and relatives	12	26	19	26	31	26

Source: Compiled from the field data collected during Feb. and March 2022.

The causes of stress were assessed among respondents based on their infection status during the pandemic. Notably, changes in living conditions, sleeping habits, and eating habits were reported by the majority, with 92%, 96%, and 92% of the total respondents experiencing these changes, respectively. A significant difference emerged in the perception of changes in health, with 100% of infected respondents reporting such changes compared to 52% of non-infected respondents. Changes in the health of other family members were reported by 81% of infected and 77% of non-infected respondents. The death of a spouse was a stressor for 13% of infected individuals. The death of family members and close friends and relatives was reported by 4% and 26% of infected respondents, respectively.

Thus from the above findings, it is understood that varied causes of stress were experienced by respondents during the pandemic, categorized by infection status. Changes in living conditions, sleeping habits, and eating habits were widespread stressors for both infected and non-infected individuals. However, a noteworthy distinction is observed in the perceived impact on health, with 100% of infected individuals reporting changes compared to 52% of their non-infected counterparts. The emotional toll of death was evident, particularly with the death of close friends and relatives, which affected 26% of infected respondents. These inferences underscore the multifaceted nature of stressors during the pandemic, emphasizing the need for targeted support and interventions based on individual experiences.

Table 6 Health Problems Caused by Stress among Employees During Pandemic

Health Problem Caused by Stress	No. of Respondents (N=120)	Percentage
Heaviness in arms and legs	72	60
Hot and cold spells	49	41
Hypertension	14	12
Asthma/breathlessness	26	22
Prolonged illness	41	34
Stomach problems pain / upset	17	14
Fever with cough	65	54
Incessant cough	29	24
Vomiting and dieriha	22	18

Source: Compiled from the field data collected during Feb. and March 2022.

The health problems caused by COVID-19 induced stress were examined among 120 respondents during the pandemic. Heaviness in arms and legs was a prevalent issue, affecting 60% of the respondents. Hot and cold spells were reported by 41%, while hypertension was noted by 12% of individuals. Asthma or breathlessness affected 22% of respondents, and prolonged illness was reported by 34%. Stomach problems, including pain and upset, were experienced by 14% of individuals. Fever with cough was prevalent, impacting 54% of the respondents. Incessant cough affected 24%, while vomiting and diarrhea were reported by 18%.

These findings from Table 6 shed light on the health problems and symptoms attributed to stress among the surveyed individuals during the pandemic. Heaviness in arms and legs, along with fever with cough, emerged as the significant health issues affecting 60% and 54% of respondents, respectively. Hot and cold spells, asthma or breathlessness, and prolonged illness were reported by substantial proportions of individuals, highlighting the diverse range of health problems associated with COVID-19 stress. From the above, the need for addressing mental health and stress management to mitigate the potential impact on physical well-being during challenging times is realised.

Table 7 Views of the respondents on the Changes in the level of stress during Covid-19

Details	Infected (47)		Not Infected (73)		Total (120)	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
There is no change in the stress level	3	6	9	12	12	10
There is a mild change in the stress level	11	23	14	19	25	21
There is a strong change in the stress level	29	62	37	51	66	55
There is a severe change in the stress level	4	9	13	18	17	14
Total	47	100	73	100	120	100
Chi- square value	3.631551					
P value	0.304097					

Source: Compiled from the field data collected during Feb. and March 2022.

An examination of changes in stress levels based on infection status during the pandemic, the data reveals that a substantial proportion of both infected (62%) and non-infected individuals (51%) experienced a strong change in stress levels. Notably, a higher percentage of infected individuals (23%) reported a mild change in stress levels compared to their non-infected counterparts (19%). However, these variations did not result in a statistically significant association, as evidenced by the chi-square value of 3.631551 and a p-value of 0.304097.

It can be inferred that a shared challenge in managing stress during the pandemic, affecting both infected and non-infected individuals. The predominant experience of a strong change in stress levels suggests a universal impact on mental well-being. The absence of a statistically significant association with infection status implies that the magnitude of stress level changes is not solely dependent on whether an individual was infected. This emphasizes the complex interplay of various factors contributing to stress, urging the need for comprehensive mental health support tailored to individual circumstances during times of adversity such as COVID-19.

FINDINGS

The study uncovered significant disparities in the nature of work undertaken by engineering and managerial graduates before and during the pandemic. Faced with the challenges posed by the pandemic, these graduates, despite their qualifications, transitioned from their original roles to engage in marketing jobs. The rejection of the null hypothesis and acceptance of the alternate hypothesis indicates that COVID-19 has led to notable alterations in the professional landscape for these graduates. Notably, the study found no substantial variation in the infection status based on educational qualifications, with a chi-square test yielding a p-value of 0.920212 and confirming the acceptance of H_02 . Consequently, there is no discernible difference in COVID-19 infection rates between engineering and management graduates, suggesting a universal impact irrespective of qualifications.

Infected respondents commonly reported symptoms such as general health weakness (97%), fever with cough (86%), and throat infection (76%). While changes in sleeping habits, living conditions, and eating habits were prevalent among the majority (92%), the causes of stress varied, including changes in the health status of family members and personal health, as well as instances of spousal or familial deaths. Despite commonalities in certain stressors between infected and non-infected individuals, differences emerged regarding changes in health and the impact of personal losses. The study also

highlighted the health problems faced by graduates during the pandemic, including heaviness in arms and legs (60%), fever with cough (54%), and hot and cold spells (41%), all attributed to work-related stress. Although changes in stress levels were reported as mild to moderate in the majority of cases, variations between infected and non-infected individuals were observed, though not statistically significant.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to achieve two primary objectives: firstly, to comprehend the causes and repercussions of stress experienced by engineering and management graduates during the pandemic, and secondly, to evaluate the perceived alterations in job stress levels attributed to the Coronavirus pandemic. The investigation framed and tested three hypotheses to guide the research. The findings shown significant disparities in the nature of work undertaken by engineering and management graduates before and during the pandemic. Notably, the pandemic prompted a considerable shift in job roles, with many graduates shifting to marketing jobs to manage the challenges posed by the crisis. The rejection of H_01 confirmed that the pandemic has resulted in noteworthy changes in the nature of work among these graduates. The study revealed that a substantial majority of both infected and non-infected individuals reported a strong change in stress levels during the pandemic, indicating a universal impact on mental well-being. However, the absence of a statistically significant association, as indicated by the chi-square test and p-value, suggested that the magnitude of stress level changes was not solely dependent on infection status. Thus, the pandemic has induced notable changes in job stress levels, transcending infection status. The rejection of H_01 implies a significant shift in the nature of work done by engineering and management graduates, particularly with many transitioning to marketing roles during the pandemic. The acceptance of H_02 , with a non-significant chi-square test result, suggests that there is no substantial difference in the COVID-19 infection status between engineering and management graduates, affirming the pandemic's universal impact. While there were commonalities in views on changes in living conditions, sleeping habits, eating habits, and the health status of family members, differences emerged in the perspectives of infected and non-infected individuals regarding changes in personal health and the impact of personal losses. Despite these variations, the study found no statistically significant differences in the views of engineering and management graduates on changes in stress levels during the COVID-19 situation.

The following null hypotheses were framed and tested.

H₀1: The number of dependents (non-working spouse, dependent children, and dependent parents) does not have any relationship to the level of job stress an employee undergoes.

H₀2: In-compatibility between employees' work and life dimensions does not cause job stress.

H₀3: There is no relationship between the level of job stress and the level of job satisfaction.

H₀4: There is no association between overtime work and job stress of the employees.

H₀5: There is no relationship between the quantum of salary and the level of job stress among the employees.

H₀6: There is no association between the distance commuted to the workplace and the level of job stress of the employees.

H₀7: There is no relationship between the educational qualification and the degree of job stress experienced by the respondents in organizational work life.

Objectives of the Study

The study mainly focuses on the factors affecting job stress and job satisfaction and the relationship between Job stress and job satisfaction of employees of a co-operative banking institution, with particular reference to the District Central Cooperative Bank (DCCB) in Tamil Nadu. The study has been designed to develop an understanding of the subject by analysing the status of job stress and stress management mechanisms adopted by the employees.

The following are the specific objectives of the study:

1. To identify and analyse the factors influencing employee stress in the District Central Cooperative Bank in Tamil Nadu.
2. To identify and analyse the factors influencing job satisfaction of the employees of the District Central Cooperative Bank in Tamil Nadu; and
3. To analyse the relationship between the job stress and job satisfaction of the employees of the DCCB.

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