

Applying Health Belief Model in Assessing Malaysian Graduate's Emotional Wellness Post COVID 19 Outbreak: A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract

Purpose: The Covid-19 outbreak has brought to the closure of Higher Education Institutions, and the unforeseen shift towards online learning, combined with the Ministry of Higher Education's advice to stay put may pressure future graduates, especially those who are stuck in the university premises. The continuous spread of the epidemic, strict isolation measures, online learning and delays in starting new semesters across all universities in the country were expected to influence the mental health of university graduates. Report from Malaysian university's counsellors have shown a rising trend in graduates seeking counselling during the Movement Control Order period. This study aims to propose new research framework with the aims to assess graduate's emotional wellness post Covid-19 outbreak.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected through literatures search on emotional wellness.

Findings: This study proposed a research framework on graduate's emotional wellness that comprises of demographic variable, perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, self-efficacy and cues to action.

Research limitations/implications: Since this study is focusing on Malaysian Graduates, further study should be conducted in other countries as well.

Practical implications: This paper is to introduce a conceptual research framework on graduate's emotional wellness post COVID19 outbreak. The research framework can be used for future research to introduce Graduate Emotional Wellness Index (GEWI).

Originality/value: To be completed

Keywords: Covid-19, Health belief model, Emotion theory, Graduate wellness, GEWI

Introduction

A COVID-19 epidemic has been spreading in China and other parts of the world since December 2019. Essentially, at the beginning of this COVID-19 outbreak, it had already been causing many emotional effects such as confusion, panic, extreme sadness, an overwhelming fear of death, and increased anxiety to just about anyone (Adib Farhan, 2020). The continuous spread of the epidemic, strict isolation measures and delays in starting schools, colleges, and universities across the country were expected to influence the mental health of college graduates. More than one billion graduates (55.9% of total enrolled learners) in 131 countries around the world were interrupted by this COVID-19 (United Nation's Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020)).

There have been reports on the psychological impact of the epidemic on the general public, patients, medical staff, children, and older adults (Li et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020). The widespread outbreak of infectious disease such as COVID-19 has been associated with psychological distress and symptoms of mental illness (Bao et al., 2020). Due to this outbreak also, university graduates are stressed about dormitory evacuation and cancellation of anticipated events such as exchange studies and graduation ceremonies. Some lost their part-time jobs as local businesses closed. Furthermore, graduates in their final years are anxious about the job market they are going to enter soon (Joyce Lee, 2020). Meanwhile, emotional wellness plays a significant role in maintaining positive mental health. It controls the health-seeking behaviour, improves decision-making skill, increases interpersonal communication, and helps recover from stressful situations or illness. Thus, emotional wellness play a significant role in the overall well-being of an individual (Kakunje, Mithur, & Kishor, 2020).

During COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown period between April and May 2020, 20.4% graduates faced minimal to moderate anxiety level (Sundarasan et al., 2020). Other 2.8% graduates experienced most extreme anxiety levels due to financial constraints, remote online learning, and uncertainty related to their academic performance, graduation, and future career prospects. Findings from Otu, Charles, and Yaya (2020), and Cao et al. (2020), on the impact of COVID-19 on graduate education and well-being, show that the respondents reported experiencing anxiety symptoms, which were positively correlated with increased concerns about academic delays, economic effects of the outbreak, and impacts on daily life. Besides, data from Malaysian university's counsellors have also shown a rising trend in graduates seeking counselling during the Movement Control Order period (Muhammad Faris Abdullah, 2020). This involved cases of depression and anxiety due to various factors, including living in isolation, not being able to see their families, worry about their families' well-being, and concern on the impact of the lockdown on their study plans. Thus, this study aims to propose a research framework which will employ Health Belief Model with the aims to assess graduate's emotional wellness post Covid-19 outbreak.

Literature Review

Emotional Wellness

Wellness is defined as a dynamic and ongoing process involving self-awareness and healthy choices to achieve a successful lifestyle. This relies on the balance between the physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual realms (Thimmapuram et al., 2017). Emotional wellness means having an awareness of individual's positive feelings, its expression in a healthy manner, stability of mood, sense of well-being, positive attitude toward others and having stress-coping abilities at rough and tough times of life (Habib, Riaz, & Akram, 2012; Rehman, Nadeem, Hussain, Khan, & Katpar, 2015). Wellness Centre of Vanderbilt University defined emotional wellness as the awareness of feelings and their expression in a healthy

manner with stability of mood, sense of self, positive attitude toward others, and the ability to cope with stress (Zhang, Zhao, Lester, & Zhou, 2014). Emotional wellness of an individual determines the level of self-control and self-awareness of a person (Foster, Keller, & Boomer, 2007). It further emphasizes the importance of positive outlook towards life circumstances, the capability to cope with stress and ability to maintain fulfilling relationships with others (Foster et al., 2007). Emotional health is important for an individual, as this is also dependent upon self-respect, self-confidence and one's individual dignity, which in turn also plays a role in performance (Katpar, Rana, Hussain, Khan, & Rehman, 2017).

Graduate Wellness during COVID-19

Among many global health, economic and societal disruptions, the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak has forced millions to physically isolate. Combine that with extensive news coverage on the outbreak and an unknown future, and it is the reason why anxiety is on the rise (World Economic Forum, 2020). Research in the United Kingdom has found that significant depression and significant anxiety have doubled after a COVID-19 lockdown was enforced in the country. A similar situation was also reported in Italy, leading the Italian government to launch a nationwide psychological support programme for those mentally affected by the lockdown. There is already emerging evidence of the same situation is happening in Malaysia. At the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), data have shown a rising trend in graduates seeking counselling during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period. This involved cases of depression and anxiety due to various factors, including living in isolation, not being able to see their families, worry about their families' well-being, and concern on the impact of the lockdown on their study plans (Muhammad Faris Abdullah, 2020). Prior to the MCO also, in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's (UKM), among the 1,642 graduates screened on campus, 15.1% experienced high anxiety, 11.2% suffered from high depression, and 7% were experiencing high stress level. Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) has also seen a slight increase in mental health cases. As for Sunway University, the counsellors noticed that more graduates were feeling anxious due to the uncertainties brought on by the MCO (Sandhya Menon, 2020). Universiti Malaysia Pahang took the initiatives handling their graduates who needed a counselling service due to anxiety from Covid-19 by fully using the social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Skype (Cahyadi, Mukhlisin, & Pramono, 2020).

Health Belief Model

Health Belief Model (HBM) is a health-specific social cognitive model that attempts to predict and explain why individuals change or maintain specific health behaviours (Laranjo, 2016). HBM is a psychological model that attempts to explain and predict health behaviours. This model suggests that changes in health behaviours are predicted by perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, and perceived barriers, cues to action and self-efficacy (Park, 2011). Based on the review of these references, HBM that consists of demographic variable, perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, self-efficacy and cues to action has been used as an antecedent to measure Graduate Emotional Wellness model, and all of the variable are discussed below:

a) Demographic variable

Demographic variables are often important determinants of well-being (Addai, Opoku-Agyeman, & Amanfu, 2014). For example, Sibiyi, Buitendach, Kanengoni, and Bobat (2014) showed that demographics such as age, race and educational status influence turnover intention, Balogun (2014) found that demographic variables impact willingness to share knowledge; and Dwivedi and Kaushik (2015) proved that age, educational status and marital status influenced organisational citizenship behaviour.

Many other demographic variables also have a strong influence on emotional wellness (Zacher & Winter, 2011). Thus, in this study, the demographic variable that will be used are age, gender, religion, and location during Movement Control Order.

b) Perceived Susceptibility

Perceived susceptibility refers to the likelihood of getting a disease or condition. Thus, HBM predicts that individuals who perceive that they are susceptible to a disease will engage in behaviours that would help reduce the risk of developing the disease (Champion & Skinner, 2008). In this study, perceived susceptibility is the stress factor. Meanwhile, the problems reported in graduates with high academic stress are depression, anxiety, behavioural problems, irritability, etc. (Deb, Strodl, & Sun, 2015; Verma, Sharma, & Larson, 2002).

c) Perceived Severity

Perceived severity is an individual's perception of the seriousness or severity of a disease or condition (Champion & Skinner, 2008). Perceived seriousness to a disease varies from individual to individual. Some base their beliefs on their medical knowledge or information they have gathered throughout their lives, and some base their belief on the negative effect a disease would have on one's lifestyle. For example, loss of work, financial difficulties, family issues, and pain or discomfort could all influence one's perception of the seriousness or severity of an illness (Aris, 2016). In this study, the health and risk behaviours of graduates, include substance use, are considered as health stress which can increase substance use among graduates, and therefore an important determinant for their health and well-being status (Papadopoulou et al., 2014).

d) Perceived Benefits

Perceived benefits refer to an individual's assessment of the value or efficacy of engaging in a health-promoting behaviour to decrease the risk of a disease. HBM proposes that the more benefits that individuals perceive that a particular action will have regarding a perceived threat, the more likely they will engage in that behaviour regardless of the objective facts regarding the effectiveness of the action (Champion & Skinner, 2008). In this study, perceived benefits that would contribute in promoting the behaviour to decrease the risk of diseases are knowledge and practice.

e) Perceived Barriers

Perceived barriers refer to potential complications involved with a particular health action. They are factors that act as impediments to undertaking recommended behaviours. HBM suggests that the perceived benefits must outweigh the perceived barriers in order for behaviour change to occur (Champion & Skinner, 2008). In this study, perceived barriers that would affect the emotional wellness is external stress.

f) Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's perception of his or her competence to successfully perform a behaviour. An individual's beliefs surrounding their own levels of self-efficacy can have an impact on how they feel, think and motivate themselves. This can lead to significant contrasts in behaviour between individuals with differing levels of self-efficacy. Those with a strong or high sense of self-efficacy believe in their own capability deeply, seeing challenges as tasks to be mastered rather than threats to be avoided (Bandura, 1977). Further, HBM recognizes that confidence in the individual's ability to affect change in outcomes is crucial to health behaviour change (Champion & Skinner, 2008).

g) Cues to Action

Cues to action refer to the internal or external cues that prompt the action. HBM theorizes that a cue, or trigger, is necessary for prompting engagement in health promoting behaviours (Champion & Skinner, 2008). In this study, the cues to action are the psychosocial support. The term “psychosocial support” is in line with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to describe any type of intervention or support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial wellbeing or to prevent or treat mental disorders, often focusing on human capacity and an enabling environment (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2006). Examples of psychosocial factors include social support, loneliness, marriage status, social disruption, bereavement, work environment, social status, and social integration (Gellman & Turner, 2013). Psychosocial factors used in this study are government, university and family support.

Basic Emotion Theory

Basic emotion theory proposes that human beings have a limited number of emotions (e.g., fear, anger, joy, sadness) that are biologically and psychologically “basic” whereby each is manifested in an organized recurring pattern of associated behavioural components (Keltner & Cordaro, 2017; Wilson-Mendenhall, Barrett, & Barsalou, 2013). Abe and Izard (1999) argued that the basic emotions are preserved because their biological and social functions are essential in evolution and adaption; he further suggested that basic emotions have innate neural substrates and universal behavioural phenotypes (Gu, Wang, Patel, Bourgeois, & Huang, 2019). Basic emotion theory has also been central to the study of emotional expression. This theory is applicable in this study, since emotions have been found to be related to graduates’ well-being, the quality of learning, productivity, and interaction (Lipnevich, MacCann, Bertling, Naemi, & Roberts, 2012).

Conceptual Framework

From the literature above, this research employs HBM as a conceptual framework to understand how graduates’ demographic variable, psychosocial factors, psychological factors, perceptions of susceptibility, severity, benefits, barriers, and cues to action would affect their emotional wellness. All of the variables used will help in understanding graduate’s emotional wellness (refer Figure 1).

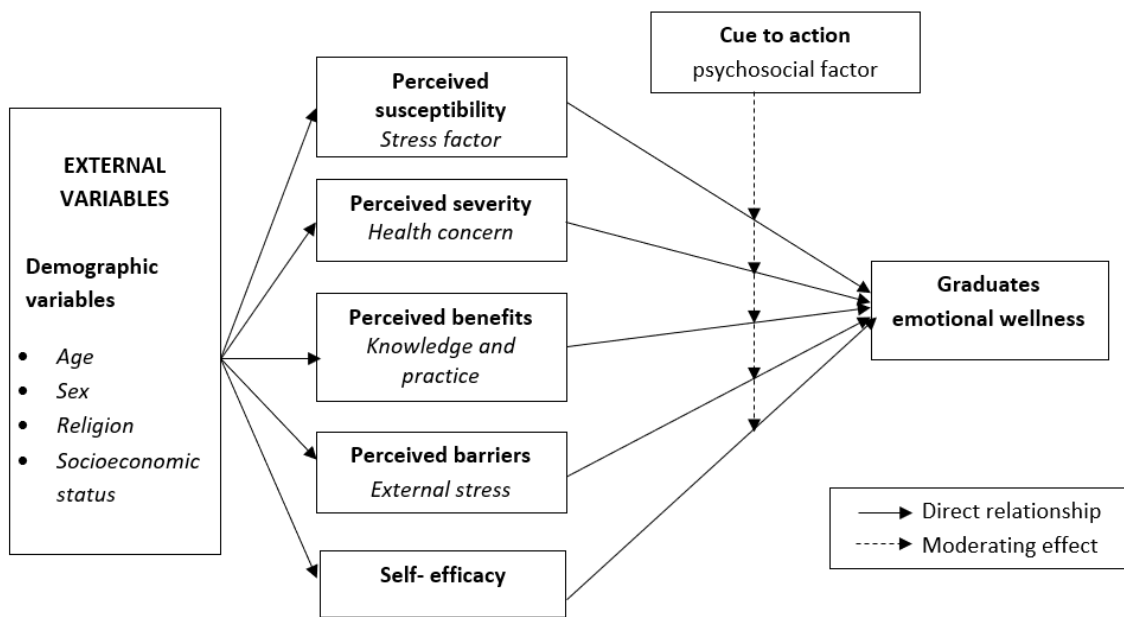


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Conclusion

The rapid spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak has put considerable strain on the physical, social, economic, and mental well-being of graduates (Kannampallil et al., 2020). The objective of this paper is to propose a new research framework, namely Graduate's Emotional Wellness Index (GEWI) which will employ Health Belief Model with the aims to assess graduate's emotional wellness post Covid-19 outbreak. GEWI provides several specific applications to several stakeholders including government, ministry of higher education and graduates itself. The government may gauge insights on significant progress in fulfilling its core aspirations for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), most notably in enhancing the quality of overall system, quality of HEIs and quality of graduate. The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) may apply this framework as a guideline in regulating and reformulating relevant regulations and policies to strengthen graduates' emotional wellness efforts and bring consensus to the quality domains of HEI's graduate. Additionally, GEWI is expected to be a part of emotional wellness strategies and monitoring tool for graduates in order to realize United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Besides, GEWI will provide management, academicians, and other HEIs staffs with a comprehensive approach to identifying, addressing, and reducing graduate health problems in order to develop holistic graduates. Besides, GEWI is believed to be a resource for graduates to apply the best practice of graduates' emotional wellness during and after COVID 19 period with the focus on ensuring healthy lives and the promotion of well-being for all nations and people of all ages.

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