

STUDIES ON THE AWARENESS, APPREHENSIONS AND ASPIRATIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF WEST BENGAL, INDIA IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Sanchita Bhattacharya^{1*}, Shakya Sinha², Sajal Bhattacharya³, Sandeep Poddar⁴

¹Department of Communicative English, Asutosh College (University of Calcutta), Kolkata, India

²Department of Zoology, Asutosh College (University of Calcutta), Kolkata, India

³Department of Zoology, Asutosh College (University of Calcutta), Kolkata, India

⁴Lincoln University College, Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author's Email: sanchitaa.b@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020. The governments have imposed various restrictions and taken several preventive measures to contain the spread of this viral infection. People started experiencing a new, unpredictable and rapidly evolving situation. During this one year of pandemic period, the rising tide of coronavirus infections, strict preventive measures like lockdowns and corona curfews, living life on the edge every day, uncertainty of the future and many more adverse situations have triggered anxiety among different groups of people including the college students. After a year of the ongoing pandemic, the situation still demands a sensible response towards the disease. A study was conducted to know the overall awareness level of COVID-19 among the students of West Bengal, India. Respondents of this study were apprehensive about several factors like the decreasing availability of jobs, a lack of real-life experience and a turbulent economic situation. The aspirations of students of getting their dream job, seeking admission in a prestigious institution and becoming economically independent are also affected by the pandemic situation. In this context, there is an urgent need for sustained awareness through recognized and responsible print, electronic, and social media so that students can update their understanding of the pandemic. The development of scientific temper and rationalization among the students may reduce the anxiety of their future and help them to nurture their aspirations for better career prospects in this pandemic situation.

Keywords: COVID-19; Awareness; Apprehension; Aspiration

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 emerged in December 2019 from Wuhan city, Hubei province, China (WHO, 2020; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020). It has spread to over 220 countries, and hitherto, caused over 2 million deaths with more than 100 million confirmed cases (WHO, 2021). The disease transmits through virus-laden respiratory droplets from man to man during close contact (WHO, 2021). COVID-19 has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). The governments have imposed various restrictions and taken several preventive measures to contain the spread of this viral infection. A nation-wide lockdown was imposed to urge people to maintain social distancing. Educational institutions were shut down (Sahu, 2020) switching pupils to an online mode of learning. People

started experiencing a new, unpredictable and rapidly evolving situation. Family dynamics have remarkably changed, travel is restricted and leisure activities have been curtailed. This whole situation has drastically changed the life of the people in this world. They are trying to adapt to the 'new normal' mode of living. This pandemic has greatly rattled education, economics, healthcare and social activities.

During the pandemic, awareness programs were conducted by the Government and several NGOs using electronic media, print media as well as social media platforms. In this one year of pandemic period, the rising tide of coronavirus infections, strict preventive measures like lockdowns and corona curfews, living life on the edge every day, uncertainty of the future and many more adverse situations have triggered anxiety among different age groups (Son *et al.*, 2020; Roy *et al.*, 2020).

Myths and myth busters got circulated and researches also provided newer information on COVID-19. An impact of this paradigm shift has also been witnessed among graduate and post-graduate students, as they are at the threshold of their academic and professional lives. Most of them belong to the age group ranging from 19 - 24 years, which is a vulnerable group to mental health concerns (Son *et al.*, 2020). West Bengal is a state in eastern India having students from different cities and diverse backgrounds, studying together. Affording hi-tech gadgets are beyond the reach of some of these students. This study is an attempt to know the level of awareness among the college students of West Bengal about the COVID-19 and their apprehension after one year of the declaration of the pandemic. This study will also assess and analyze the impact of pandemic on their future aspirations.

METHODOLOGY

This study included a total of 227 graduation students, both undergraduate and post-graduate, from the state West Bengal, of India, with varying socio-economical status and residing in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. Most of the students who participated in this study were between 19 and 24 years of age. A questionnaire comprising 30 questions was prepared by the authors. 10 questions were about the general information about COVID-19 to assess their awareness level. A total of 20 questions were asked to analyze their apprehension about the disease and to assess the impact of this pandemic on their aspirations about academic and professional career after one year of the ongoing pandemic. The information about COVID-19 was collected from WHO, CDC news portals and websites and research publications by several investigators. The questions were circulated as a Google docs form among the participants with information centering the study. The time period was for seven days (21/01/2021 to 28/01/2021). The collected data were processed by the authors using the Google Spreadsheet application.

We used a two-tailed *t*-test to assess if there is any significant difference between the responses of male and female participants.

RESULTS

Among the 227 participants in the study, 84 participants were male (32.8%) and 142 were female (68.2%). 83.6% responded that no one in their family had COVID-19.

Part-1: Awareness about COVID-19

Out of the total 227 participants, about 47.8% of the

participants knew that SARS-CoV-2 causes the COVID-19 disease. However, most of them, about 99.1%, are aware that COVID-19 transmits through respiratory droplets. When asked about the groups susceptible to the disease, 82.7% responded correctly. About 82.3% of the participants knew that the minimum quarantine period in India is 14 days. 73.9% knew that using alcohol is the best way to clean surfaces to prevent the spread of infection. Participants who were acquainted with the vaccine developments in India were 62.8%. However, about 46.5% of participants think that vaccination will not eradicate the disease and 42.9% responded that they are unsure if the vaccination will eradicate the disease. Regarding the knowledge about pandemic and herd immunity, 89.4% of people knew the meaning of pandemic and 62.8% of people knew what herd immunity is. The data collected during the studies reveal that majority of the people (35.8%) think that electronic media is the most reliable source of news related to COVID-19, followed by social media (33.6%) and print media (16.8%). We compared the responses of the male and female respondents. The *t*-value for the analysis is 0.5433, which is lesser than the critical *t*-value (2.102). Hence, there is no significant difference in the responses of male and female participants.

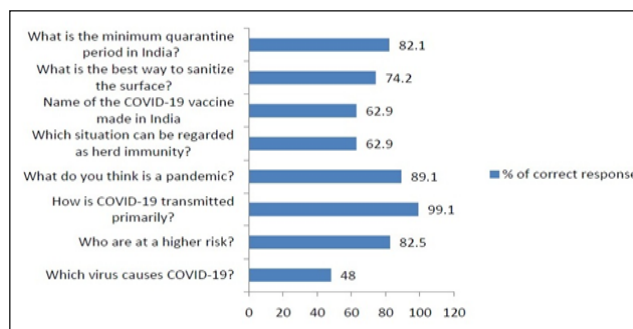


Figure 1: Awareness of the Students About the COVID-19 Pandemic

Part-2: Apprehension about COVID-19

Among the participants, 32.7% reported that going out of the houses cause anxiety during the pandemic. 71.2% of the respondents are apprehensive about any of their family members getting the disease. 74.3% of the participants said that they are missing live learning in the classroom and 60.6% said that being confined in their homes gave rise to frustration. Among the participants, 79.6% responded that they are worried about a lack of real-life experience due to this pandemic and about 81.4% feel disadvantaged as the academic sessions are running late. Regarding the apprehensions about their

career prospects, 88.5%, 93.4% and 87.2% responded that they are worried about their career, the economic crisis and the decreasing availability of jobs respectively. This shows that in this coronavirus era, career planning is in flux. The COVID-19 generation faces really disrupted education provisions. Still there is hope as only about 15% of participants believe it is impossible to get back to the pre-pandemic normal situation. The data was assessed to see if there is any significant difference in the response of male and female participants. The *t*-value is 0.69 of the paired *t*-test. The *t*-value is much lower than the critical *t*-value at the degree of freedom =18. Hence, there is no significant difference in the responses of male and female participants.

Table 1: Apprehensions of the Students During the Pandemic

Question		Responses (%)		
		Yes	No	Can't say
1	Does going out of the house cause you anxiety?	32.7	44.7	22.6
2	Are you afraid that a family member can get the disease?	71.2	15.5	13.3
3	Are you missing live learning with classmates in the classroom?	74.3	17.7	8.0
4	Are you scared about the decreasing availability of jobs due to this pandemic?	87.2	6.2	6.6
5	Are you worried about the economic effects of the pandemic?	93.4	2.2	4.4
6	Are you worried about your career prospects?	88.5	6.2	5.3
7	Do you feel disadvantaged as the academic sessions are running late?	81.4	10.6	8.0
8	Do you feel frustrated being confined to your home due to this pandemic?	60.6	28.3	11.1
9	Does a lack of real-life/practical experience worry you?	79.6	9.3	11.1
10	Is it possible to get back to the pre-pandemic normal situation?	35.8	15.0	49.1

Part-3: Aspirations due to the pandemic

About 65.9% of participants think that the pandemic has affected their desire to have a campus life and 72.1% think that they have missed gaining experience through social interactions. With reference to the aspirations for getting a degree on time and landing a dream job, about 57.5% and 54.5% of the participants responded that they got affected respectively. On asking about their future studies, 41.2% responded that their desire to seek overseas education and 50.0% said that their aspirations for obtaining admission in a prestigious institution are negatively impacted by the pandemic situation. 65.9% of the respondents believe that their aspiration to become economically independent got hampered while 66.8% think that their aspiration to support their family will not be fulfilled properly. Approximately 65% of the

participants believe that their aspiration to travel widely is not the same as before. 69.5% of the participants responded that they are losing out on getting hands-on experience due to the pandemic situation. There is no significant difference between the responses of male and female participants (*t*-value is 0.234, which is lower than the critical *t*-value)

Table 2: Response of the Students About their Aspirations During the Pandemic

How has this pandemic affected your desire to		Response (%)		
		Yes	No	Can't Say
1	get a degree on time?	57.5	25.7	16.8
2	seek admission in a prestigious institution?	50.0	31.4	18.6
3	seek overseas education?	41.2	39.4	19.5
4	experience campus life?	65.9	28.3	5.8
5	get hands-on experience?	69.5	16.8	13.7
6	be economically independent?	65.9	23.8	10.6
7	get a dream job?	54.4	31.4	14.2
8	support your family?	66.8	21.2	11.9
9	travel widely?	65.0	27.0	8.0
10	gain experience through social interaction?	72.1	17.3	10.6

DISCUSSION

Pandemics and epidemics are infectious diseases. Most of the causative agents of the pandemics originate from animals. Eventually, by the course of evolution, the pathogens become capable of human-to-human transmission (Pike *et al.*, 2010). Government agencies around the globe take preventive measures of different scales or magnitude in times of a pandemic crisis (Pike *et al.*, 2010). Awareness among the public about the disease is one of the most important preventive measures for infectious diseases. COVID-19 pandemic is also no exception. Different strains of SARS-CoV-2, the causal virus of COVID-19, have already surfaced (WHO, 2021; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020; Chatterjee & Bhattacharya, 2020). These new strains are making it challenging for healthcare workers and scientists to develop comprehensive control measures and treatments. In these circumstances, awareness about the modes of transmission for the virus, vaccines, the biological nature of the disease and maintenance of proper hygiene during the pandemic could be crucial. Students are the most active group of individuals in any population and are also particularly vulnerable to mental health concerns (Son *et al.*, 2020). The overall awareness level of the students during this study was considerably high. Students are

well aware of the mode of transmission of the virus. They know what kind of hygiene to maintain during the pandemic. Most of the students are aware of the meaning of the terms like 'pandemic' and herd immunity.' This implies that students are aware of the basic facts about COVID-19. Vaccine developments were being continuously researched by several countries, including India, throughout the one year of the pandemic (ICMR, 2021). Students are aware of the vaccine developments in India. Significantly, only 10.6% of the students think that the vaccine will eradicate the disease. This assumption could be due to a lack of reliable information about the COVID-19 vaccination and its efficacy. In this study, the most consumable and trusted sources for any news regarding COVID-19 have been electronic and social media for the students. Social media is not a validated source for pieces of information (Allcott *et al.*, 2019). Further studies are required to assess and analyze if there is any impact of news from diverse sources on awareness among the students.

As a lockdown was immediately imposed upon the declaration of the pandemic, the academic sessions ran behind schedule and students had to go through a period of uncertainty regarding their obtaining a degree. Along with this, the world witnessed a rise in unemployment and numerous people lost their jobs. With a halt in regular lives, the global economy also started shrinking due to the pandemic (Mahmud *et al.*, 2020). The graduation students were found apprehensive about the same in this study. They felt disadvantaged with the academic sessions running behind schedule. This in turn results in apprehensions among the students about their career prospects. Respondents were also apprehensive about several factors like the decreasing availability of jobs, a lack of real-life experience and the adverse economic condition. These collective factors could have had an impact on their aspiration for getting a dream job. A vast majority of students consider this situation to be a drawback in securing a position at the prestigious institutions for their higher studies and research. So, this pandemic has negatively affected their career prospects. Apprehensions about the outcome of the prolonged crisis caused by the COVID-19 outbreak are taking a toll on the students. They are facing a future riddled with uncertainty and insecurity.

In several studies, it is evident that pandemics do evoke anxiety among people (Everts, 2013; Roy *et al.*, 2020; Son *et al.*, 2020). The lockdown has had similar effects on the students. They feel frustrated about being confined in their homes and they do miss the traditional interactive learning with their classmates in college classrooms.

Their aspiration to gain experience through social interactions also got hampered. That possibly reflects in their response about not getting enough hands-on-experience as well.

Moreover, in our study, it is seen that a sizable proportion of students are not apprehensive about getting out of their houses. Students are found to be reasonably aware of the most susceptible age groups of this disease. That probably is one of the reasons behind them to be less apprehensive to get outside their homes. Prolonged confinement inside the house, by compulsion, has also led to frustration and anxiousness about their academic and professional careers. However, this assumption needs further validation through comprehensive researches towards this direction. Most of the participants are anxious about their family members getting infected by COVID-19. That perhaps indicates their emotional attachment towards their family. Nevertheless, COVID-19 has affected their aspirations to support their families after completing higher education and also to become economically independent.

The world is moving forward towards a 'new normal' or 'new future' (WHO, 2021) which is different from pre-pandemic situations. A sizable percentage of respondents are not sure about the possibilities of getting back to the pre-pandemic normal. After a year of the ongoing pandemic, the situation still demands a sensible response towards the disease. A high level of awareness of proper hygiene is required to prevent the spread of the disease. However, education, health, and economy are slowly getting restored by the designated authorities with long-term plans. It is important and essential that students have to accommodate themselves and adjust with this neo-normal situation. In this context, there is an urgent need for a sustained awareness through recognized and responsible print, electronic, and social media so that the studied student group can update their understanding about the pandemic and reduce their apprehensions and nurture and nourish their aspirations.

CONCLUSION

The world is facing the COVID-19 crisis for a year. Scientists are worried about multiple waves of this disease. It is an imperative necessity to disseminate information about COVID-19 among the students in a well-planned, scientific manner. Awareness among students is important as they are one of the most active groups in the community. Students are anxious, apprehensive about their careers and unsure about fulfilling their aspirations. The development of scientific temper and rationalization among the students may

reduce the anxiety of their future and help them to nurture their aspiration for better career prospects in this pandemic situation.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The first three authors (S.B, S.S & S.B) render their sincere gratitude towards Professor A. Roy, Vice Principal, Asutosh College, Kolkata, India for his encouragement and kind support during the work. Thanks are due to Ms. Chandrima Bose and Ms. Tanuka Ghosh for their assistance during the preparation of the manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Allcott, H., Gentzkow, M. & Yu, C. (2019). Trends in the diffusion of misinformation on social media. *Research & Politics*, 6(2), pp: 205316801984855. doi:10.1177/2053168019848554
- Bhattacharya, S., Basu, P. & Poddar, S. (2020). Changing epidemiology of SARS-CoV in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Hygiene*, 61(2), pp: 130–136. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.15167/2421-4248/jpmh2020.61.2.1541>
- Bhattacharya, S., Sinha, S., Baidya, D. & Tilak, R. (2020). Emergence of a Zoonotic Pathogen-Novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) in the Context of Changing Environment. *Journal of Communicable Diseases* (E-ISSN: 2581-351X & P-ISSN: 0019-5138), 52(2), 18-24.
- Chatterjee, R. & Bhattacharya, S. (2020). Could Novel Corona Virus (Sars-Cov-2) Be The Evolving Face of a New Generation of Genetically Complex Epidemiological Challenge?. *Malaysian Journal of Medical Research (MJMR)*, 4(2), pp: 49-52. Retrieved from: <https://ejournal.lucp.net/index.php/mjmr/article/view/1000>
- Cucinotta, D. & Vanelli, M. (2020). WHO Declares COVID-19 a Pandemic. *Acta Bio-Medica : Atenei Parmensis*, 91(1), pp: 157–160. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.23750/abm.v91i1.9397>
- Everts J. (2013). Announcing Swine Flu and the Interpretation of Pandemic Anxiety. *Antipode*, 45(4), pp: 809–825. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2012.01021.x>
- ICMR (2021) Indian Council of medical Research, Phase 3 Clinical Trial of COVAXIN, developed by ICMR & Bharat Biotech, shows 81% efficacy. Retrieved from: https://www.icmr.gov.in/pdf/press_release_files/Press_Release_ICMR_03_March_2021.pdf [Accessed on: 6th March 2021]
- Mahmud, M.S., Talukder, M.U. & Rahman, S.M. (2020). Does 'Fear of COVID-19' trigger future career anxiety? An empirical investigation considering depression from COVID-19 as a mediator. *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 20764020935488. Advance online publication. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020935488>.
- Pike, B.L., Saylor, K.E., Fair, J.N., Lebreton, M., Tamoufe, U., Djoko, C.F., Rimoin, A.W. & Wolfe, N.D. (2010). The origin and prevention of pandemics. *Clinical Infectious Diseases : an Official Publication of the Infectious Diseases Society of America*, 50(12), pp: 1636–1640. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1086/652860>
- Roy, D., Tripathy, S., Kar, S.K., Sharma, N., Verma, S.K. & Kaushal, V. (2020). Study of knowledge, attitude, anxiety & perceived mental healthcare need in Indian population during COVID-19 pandemic. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 51, pp: 102083. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102083>
- Sahu P. (2020). Closure of Universities Due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Impact on Education and Mental Health of Students and Academic Staff. *Cureus*, 12(4), pp: e7541. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.7541>
- Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X. & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on College Students' Mental Health in the United States: Interview Survey Study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(9), pp: e21279. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.2196/21279>
- WHO (2020) World Health Organization, Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic. Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019> [Accessed on: 10th December 2020]
- WHO (2021). WHO Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) dashboard. Retrieved from: <https://covid19.who.int> [Accessed on: 31st January 2021]