

A study on optimism amidst COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to assess if the optimism level is affected because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic among people residing in Delhi and Gurugram. “Dispositional optimism is defined as a general tendency to expect positive outcomes” (C.S Carver, 2010) The sample for the study was selected purposively and administered with an online survey using the Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) for measuring their optimism dispositions. At the same time the survey asked the sample if they feel that COVID-19 has had an effect on their optimism levels. The results show that despite the outbreak of this virus wherein World Health Organization(WHO) has declared that COVID -19 has infected more than 100000 people across the globe, majority of the sample from which data was collected, reported that their optimism was not affected even though more than 75% of them had low and moderate optimism disposition levels. A review on the possible reason for such high levels of optimism was assessed.

Keywords: Covid-19, Optimism, Unrealistic Optimism, Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R), Disposition, outbreak, epidemic.

The panic around COVID-19 outbreak spreading all over the world and now in India has been very thought provoking. As I write on the 12th of March 2020, the World Health Organization has declared COVID-19 as a pandemic with more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries. People are worried about getting infected- many corporates are encouraging work from home, some schools have shut down, vacations and work trips are getting cancelled, the economy has been impacted, stock markets have crashed, there are phases of panic one can see around every time news on COVID-19 cases pop up, stores (even online) are now running short of sanitizers, masks are being sold at inflated prices and so on.

“Coronaviruses are enveloped, positive single-stranded large RNA viruses that infect humans, but also a wide range of animals.” (Velavan & Meyer, 2020) “Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV).” A novel coronavirus is a new strain which was not known of earlier transmitted between animals and people. (WHO). The common symptoms are respiratory in nature, fever, cold, cough, shortness of breath and difficulties in breathing

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A study on Optimism amidst COVID-19

while the severe symptoms include pneumonia, kidney failure, severe acute respiratory syndrome and even death. (WHO).

COVID-19 has been diagnosed on over 100000 people across the globe (WHO, 2020) creating panic with cognitive biases that make us perceive the threat of Coronavirus as worse than it actually is. (Travers, 2020) The cases in India itself as on 9th March 2020, the diagnosed case in India has risen to 43 of which 16 belong to Italy and were visiting in India as tourists. In Assam 400 people were quarantined after coming in contact with an American tourist who was tested positive with COVID-19. (Timesofindia.com, 2020)

Matthew W. Gallagher et al.,(2013) investigated from a sample of 150048 individuals representing 142 countries the relationship between optimism, SWB (subjective well-being) and perceived health with results indicating that most individuals representing most countries throughout the world are optimistic and high scores of the same are linked with improved SWB and perceived health, therefore proving that optimism is a universal phenomenon.

Dispositional optimism wherein one has a tendency to expect positive outcomes has many benefits as per several researches done over the century; optimism is a predictor of subjective well-being (Sue Ferguson, 2010), reduced anxiety levels (Indoo Singh, 2013), higher resilience levels which in turn facilitates the reduction of distress (Gomez-Moliner Rocio, 2018).

Some of the factors that contribute to making one optimistic are high self-esteem and high social support (Lecomte, Corbière, & Thérout, 2010); Previous research done in India has found that those who belong to the higher socioeconomic backgrounds, have had school achievements and are in a good financial situation are more optimistic (Joshi & Carter, 2013). We have seen the rise of many epidemics worldwide like Ebola, Plague, SARS and H1N1 which by itself caused the death of lacs and yet we have had the global economy growing and expanding. This history could contribute to being optimistic in the current situation.

A cross cultural survey to measure optimism in Canada and China in the context of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) was conducted by administering the Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) and no significant difference was found on dispositional optimism. Optimistic bias like unrealistic optimism was also measured resulting in Chinese being higher than Canadians suggesting that the former was stronger in their belief that they were less likely to get infected in comparison to another with SARS (Ji, Zhang, & Osborne, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To study if one's optimism levels were affected by the COVID-19 epidemic.

Null Hypothesis: The optimism levels are not affected by the COVID-19 epidemic.

Alternative Hypothesis: The optimism levels are affected by the COVID-19 epidemic.

Procedure and Material Used

Online survey was used as a method of collecting data by selecting a sample purposively. All the participants (N-173) were adults, belonging to the upper middle class socio-economic background of which 66 and 107 were males and females respectively. Out of the total number of 173 participants 6 did not respond and 4 reported that they were affected and not

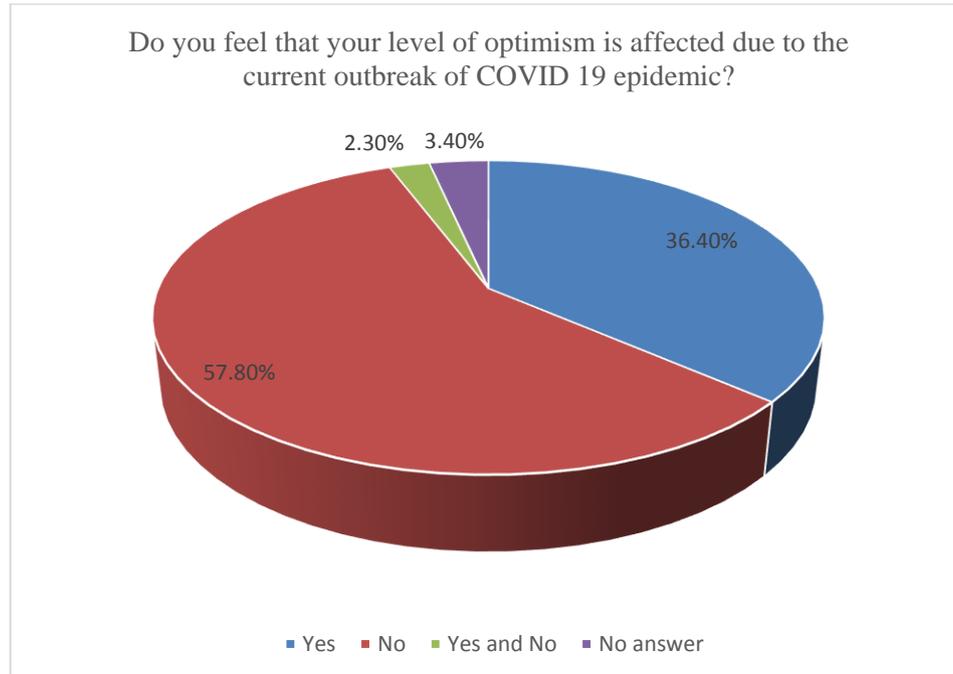
A study on Optimism amidst COVID-19

affected at the same time when asked the question if the optimism levels were affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. The participants were located in Gurugram and Delhi and fell within the age range of 18 to 73 years.

The Life Orientation Test – Revised (LOT-R) was used to study optimism disposition along with a qualitative interview question to understand if they feel COVID-19 outbreak has affected their level of optimism. The test which is most frequently used for dispositional optimism assessment is the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R). (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). This is a 10-item test that measures optimism, pessimism with 3 items measuring each and 4 items that are fillers. The responses are to be given in a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

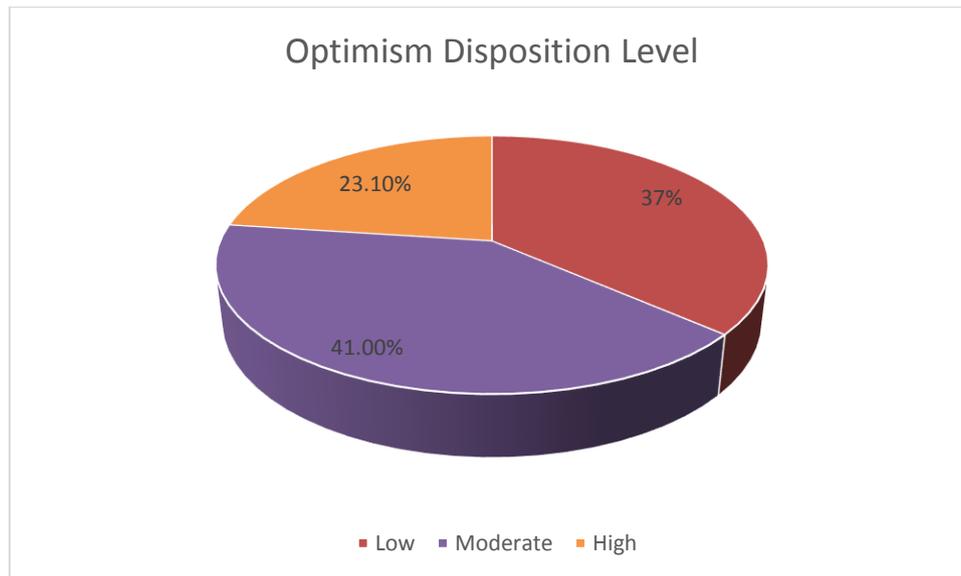
RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results show that despite the panic and stress that COVID-19 epidemic has created, when the participants were asked if their level of optimism has been affected by it; 100 out of 173 participants of the sample reported that the COVID-19 outbreak has not affected their levels of optimism. Some expressed that it is all a hype and not as serious as the media is portraying it and will subside soon, while others expressed that diseases like this keep coming and going and Indians have a high immunity to fight. Some others reported that the Government will be able to handle the situation, mentioned the importance of hygiene and awareness and believed in destiny of, what has to happen will happen but didn't feel that their optimism had been affected because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Out of the total number of 173 participants 6 did not respond to the question and 4 reported that they were affected and not affected at the same time.



Interestingly, 133 out of the 173 participants, as per the LOT-R had Low(N-62) and Moderate (N-71) levels of optimism.

A study on Optimism amidst COVID-19



As per a review on SARS epidemic and optimism, one reason of such high number of people reporting that their optimism levels were not affected by COVID-19 could be Unrealistic Optimism (Ji, Zhang, & Osborne, 2004). Unrealistic Optimism is, when one makes an estimate of a risk which is very different from the actual objective standard of that particular risk (Shepperd, Klein, Waters, & Weinstein, 2013). This cognitive bias often leads to misplaced hope and subsequent disappointment (Degges-White, 2018).

There were a number of articles being published in India of how people were not maintaining social distance (Jain, 2020), some were fleeing the quarantine facilities and hiding travel history as a result infecting others (Najib, 2020). Despite the rules of the that the Government has laid down to curb the spread of COVID-19, that is self- quarantining in the face of symptoms and quarantining for 14 days if one has travelled from other affected countries, there were many who were not adhering to them (Dharmadhikari, 2020).The consequences of unrealistic optimism in the current situation of the COVID-19 outbreak could lead to being less prepared, taking lesser precautions, not wearing a mask if one has a cough, not getting oneself tested while experiencing symptoms similar to COVID-19 as one believes that they are in the low risk or no risk situation.

CONCLUSION

As per the current research the results are indicative of the existence of unrealistic optimism during the COVID-19 outbreak considering the reports published in the newspaper on how people were being negligent during such times. People had a casual approach towards this virus, even after being aware of the COVID-19 symptoms and consequences of spreading to others didn't follow guidelines laid by the Government and World Health Organization of maintaining social distance, believing that one was at not infected despite the symptoms and travels and hence would not infect others.

Growing research indicates that people with tendencies to hold positive expectation from the future, respond to obstacles and adversities in ways that are adaptive. Hence, while it's great to be optimistic, it is important to be aware of being unrealistically optimistic by cultivating and maintaining optimistic disposition and at the same time considering the risks of actions from a realistic angle.

Limitation of the study

The sample that was chosen using purposive method belonged to the upper middle-class group, which may be the reason why more than 75% expressed that they are optimistic about the future. Julia Boehm et al, (2015) found, in her study that higher optimism and satisfaction are linked with educational achievements and socioeconomic advantage than the opposite. The same was also found in a cross-cultural research conducted in India (Joshi & Carter, 2013).

Scope for Future Research

Qualitative data collection would contribute more to the information on understanding and assessing one's cognitive processes as well as other attributes contributing to optimism in this situation.

A larger sample size would be more representative of the population and would generate a clearer analysis.

Studies understanding the optimism level of those belonging to middle class and low socio-economic backgrounds during the COVID-19 outbreak.

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A study on Optimism amidst COVID-19

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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