

# **COVID-19: Factors Causing Hospitality Worker's Emotional Job Stress and The Coping Strategy Used**

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## **Abstract**

Despite the continued spread of the novel COVID-19, few investigations on the emotional stress caused by the pandemic have been done. This study investigated the factors causing hospitality workers to experience emotional job stress and how they cope. A semi-structured interview was applied to eight participants among the hotel kitchen staff. The thematic analysis discovered that work overload, unreasonable wages, and workflow changes are among the factors that caused the emotional stress working during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the coping strategies are making self-busy, involving family activities, and socializing on social media. Future studies should concentrate on what policymakers can do to support people in achieving good mental health.

**Keywords:** job stress, coping strategies, COVID-19, pandemic, hospitality

## **1. Introduction**

In early 2020, Malaysia recorded its first Covid-19 case, which was the starting point that affected all sectors in the country (Elengoe, 2020). We must abide by the rules of the Malaysian government that declared to start the Movement Control Order (MCO), following the guidelines provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) to prevent the disease from spreading widely (Karim et al., 2020). The most visible effect of the outbreak is a decrease in inbound international travelers to Malaysia's most popular tourist spots (Karim et al., 2020).

This situation led to a survey that indicated that 50% of hotels are considering closing their doors, while 35% stated they would temporarily freeze their business (Malek, 2021). Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) estimates a revenue loss of RM560.72 million since the beginning of MCO started (Karim et al., 2020). MAH also reported that Kuala Lumpur had seen a significant increase in booking cancellations, with a total loss of RM24.91 million because of 61,859 cancellations, which is the highest in Malaysia. According to Hotels.com (2018), the most booked hotel in Kuala Lumpur is primarily five-rated stars, showing that many cancellations are majorly from the five-star hotels. This extreme instability jeopardizes hospitality workers' mental health (Yan et al., 2021). Thus, this study aims to identify the factors that make hospitality workers stressed in the middle of the pandemic and how they cope with it. This study is closely related to the theory of the Job demands-resources (JD- R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). When job demands increase and job resources are low, it can result in mental stress for the workers. The objectives

of this study are 1. to investigate the source of work stress during the pandemic and 2. to investigate the ways to cope with work stress during the pandemic.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism and Hospitality workers' stress levels**

Before the study, occupational pressures have been recognized as one of the primary factors of employee dissatisfaction, commitment, job performance, subjective well-being, prosocial behavior, and intention to stay (Darvishmotevalia & Ali, 2020). A study by Zanabar et al. (2022) showed that COVID-19-induced stress negatively impacts organization trust, job satisfaction, and self-esteem. Other than contributing to the cause of mental illness, Yu et al. (2021) stated that it can lead to other illnesses such as obesity, hypertension, diabetes, sleep disturbances, anorexia, and muscle rigidity. Kang et al. (2021) reported that there is a need for involved organizations in the tourism and hospitality industry to help their employees by offering tangible and intangible resources to the workers. Ongoing cost-cutting initiatives can damage employee satisfaction, dedication, and loyalty (Wong et al., 2021). Organizations that overlook or fail to respond to harmful working circumstances will likely create distrust and skepticism. Faridah et al. (2021) also stated that the finding shows that COVID-19 induces stress and has a detrimental impact on organizational trust, work happiness, and self-esteem. Yu et al. (2021) reported that hospitality employees with more children are more likely to experience depressive symptoms and perceive a higher COVID-19 risk. A study by Wong et al. (2021) showed that workers above 40 showed higher job satisfaction, even though they also experienced high emotional stress. One of the reasons is that they have more experience handling stressful situations compared to the young workers who are primarily new to handling highly stressful situations. In addition, the study observed that hotel workers working in privately-owned hotels experienced less emotional stress. They figured that it was because chain hotels needed to obey the guidelines made by the corporate headquarters.

### **2.2 Possible factors contribute to stressful working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Since not everyone is experiencing the same problems, many possible factors could contribute to a stressful working environment in the hospitality industry. To a study by Wong et al. (2021) and VopThanh et al. (2022), after the COVID-19 pandemic, the inconsistent and demanding hotel-work-environment stressors were the primary factors contributing to stressful working conditions. Then there is the problematic hotel handling of their employees, such as acting without adequately consulting them first and cutting their pay without discussing it, for example. Even if cost-cutting measures are unavoidable, hotel management must consider hotel employees' psychological impressions and reactions to insecure working conditions. The fear of losing their current occupations is greater than the worry of becoming ill (Khan et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, pre-pandemic stressors were third in rank. It happens due to multitasking, changes in work shifts, changes in work departments, training, and competency development. Hotel management should make significant efforts to assist employees in coping with unexpected situations Wong et al., (2021). Moreover, a study by Shapoval et al. (2021) stated that hospitality workers might experience emotional distress due to the paranoia of being infected with the disease and the possibility of spreading it to their friends and family members. Furthermore, the heavily affected hotel sales are also one of the things that worries them as they can get laid off, salaries cut off, and forced to take unpaid leave. The study by Yu et al. (2021) also mentioned that the perception of others is one of their concerns, as hospitality workers meet many new people and might have direct or indirect contact with them. However, a study by Wong et al. (2021) on hotel employees who reported a high level of pressure in their job still received positive job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Their findings differ from their primary expectation, but they concluded that it is because getting a new job is crucial in this pandemic. Therefore, the workers willingly ignore the pressures. This perception of not being able to find a new work depletes the employee's psychological resources, thereby damaging mental health, especially during these difficult circumstances (Khan et al., 2021).

### 2.3 Coping Strategies of Hospitality Workers Before COVID-19 Pandemic

According to available studies, occupational stress is highly dependent on an individual's behavior, such as personality traits and coping methods (Richter, 2011). Coping describes a person's ongoing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external and internal stressors outside their limits (Huang et al., 2018). Coping mechanisms are widely studied concerning stress (Carver et al., 1989). There are two different sorts of coping mechanisms.

#### 2.4 Positive coping strategies

The first to respond called is active or positive coping strategies. For example, direct action, problem-focused, active, and control methods might be employed to respond to a potentially harmful situation to remove the threat. Another example is that a stressed person may seek advice from a friend as a form of social diversion, considered an effective coping strategy (Kim & Agrusa, 2011). Companies may impact employees' emotions and behavior by providing encouragement, communication, and interpersonal trust (Masoodul et al., 2012). However, not all coping methods are equally successful in lowering stress or responding to it similarly (Amirkhan, 1990) since the same stressor may have different effects on various people (Huang et al., 2018). Some excellent coping tactics include active coping, scheduling, limiting competing activities, seeking positive reinforcement, social support, positive framing, accepting, denial, religious comfort, emotional ventilation, and physical or psychological disengagement (Amirkhan, 1990).

#### 2.5 Negative coping strategies

The second type uses palliative, emotion-focused, passive, and avoidance methods to alleviate emotional distress (Tsaour & Tang, 2012). However, coping in negative ways is also a choice that is highly used, such as avoidance. According to Huang et al. (2018), avoidance appears ineffective in reducing stress levels compared to active problem-solving and support-seeking tactics. For example, Tsaour & Tang (2012) and Abubakar et al. (2022) reported that job stress's negative effect on female hospitality employees' well-being was enhanced by an intentional temporary distraction from a stressful situation. Hu & Cheng (2010) found that job burnout characteristics such as emotional tiredness, depersonalization, and loss of personal accomplishment were all positively connected as the result of the avoidance coping technique. Thus, it shows that it is not a terrific way to cope with our problems with avoidance (Huang et al., 2018). Furthermore, a study by Blalock and Joiner (2000) has found that the impact of traumatic life events on stress symptoms among women was enhanced by cognitive avoidance as a coping technique. Some respondents might choose to cope in negative ways instead of positive.

#### 2.6 Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory

The JD-R Model was created by researchers Arnold Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti in 2007, and their findings were published in *The Journal of Managerial Psychology* (Mind Tools Content Team, 2017). The model has two distinct categories, which are job demands and job resources. Job demands are physical or mental difficulties in your profession, for instance, time constraints, a hefty workload, a demanding work environment, role uncertainty, and emotional labor. Physical, social, or organizational aspects that assist you in achieving goals and minimizing stress are job resources such as autonomy, excellent work relationships, career chances, coaching and mentorship, and learning and development. Many Occupational Health and Safety/workplaces have adopted the JD-R paradigm (Bakker & Demerouti, 2016). It is also used by Health and Safety regulators and government organizations worldwide, and the job demands-resources distinction was the sole reason for this theory to be the foundation of the study.

## 3. Research Methodology

Therefore, this study was conducted in a naturalistic setting through a qualitative approach to accomplish the research purpose. The methodological approach, including research design, sampling and instrument, data collection, data processing, analysis, and trustworthiness, are further discussed in this section. This research will use a qualitative method to determine work stress factors during a pandemic for hospitality workers and identify how they

cope with it. The qualitative method is deemed more suitable for this research, as the results will be more specific. The purposive sampling technique was applied for the sampling frame. The sampling design is based on the researcher's evaluation of who will provide the most helpful information for the study's goals. The researcher should concentrate on individuals who share the same viewpoint to obtain the necessary knowledge and be willing to share it (Etikan & Bala, 2017). This purposive sampling will involve a selected group of individuals that works in the hospitality sector. The study's target demographic is hospitality professionals in a 5-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur who work in the kitchen department. According to data from Foo et al. (2020), Kuala Lumpur is at the top of the list for the number of hotel industry workers impacted, as shown by the statistics. In 2020, the epidemic impacted 39 percent of people with job loss, and the numbers are climbing by the day.

Furthermore, as Malaysia's capital city, Kuala Lumpur boasts the most significant concentration of five-star hotels. Early in 2020, the epidemic has impacted 39 percent of people with job loss, and the numbers are climbing by the day. Furthermore, as Malaysia's capital city, Kuala Lumpur boasts the most significant concentration of five-star hotels. The respondents for this study are full-time kitchen department employees who worked during the epidemic. Eight full-time kitchen department employees from a few positions were selected as respondents. In this research, a semi-structured interview is used for the data collection. A semi-structured interview is one in which the interviewer does not strictly adhere to a pre-determined set of questions. Instead of a straightforward question and response approach, they will offer more open-ended questions, allowing for a debate with the interviewee (Doyle, 2020). It allows the researcher to gain more in-depth knowledge when they ask follow-up questions about the interviewee's situation. Three essential questions from each objective of the research have been developed.

#### 4. Findings

This study had a total of eight participants that agreed to do the interview, while five others were rejected since most of them were occupied with their work. They are from a few 5-star hotels in Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur. Table 1 displays the demographic profiles of the eight respondents. Four respondents are from the bakery department, three are from the culinary department, and one is from the pastry department. Numerous positions begin with commis and end with the junior sous chef. All the responders, aged 20 to 45, had at least two years of experience working in a hotel kitchen.

**Table 1 Respondent's Profile**

<b>Respondent Code</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Department</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Working experience</b>
JSC1	35-40	Bakery	Junior Sous Chef	2 years
DC2	25-30	Culinary	Demi Chef	5 years
DC3	20-25	Bakery	Demi Chef	2 years
C4	20-25	Culinary	Commis	2 years
CDP5	40-45	Culinary	Chef De Partie	20 years
DC6	25-30	Bakery	Demi Chef	4 years
C7	20-25	Bakery	Commis	2 years
CDP8	25-30	Pastry	Chef De Partie	3 years

Every participant was called using Google Meet for the interview session, and the average time spent for each participant was 20 minutes. The interview consists of four demographic questions and three questions for each objective. The interview was stopped at the eighth participant because the researcher could see that the interview had reached its saturation point. The saturation point was achieved when the researcher's interview had no new data, no new themes, no new coding, and the capacity to duplicate the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

##### 4.1 Work stress during the pandemic

The study exposes that most of the respondents are experiencing work stress during the pandemic. It can be proved by the statements given by respondent 2 until respondent 8.

"Since the staffs are decreasing during the pandemic, the workload becomes double for the existing staffs." DC1  
However, Respondent 1 felt that both conditions pre and during a pandemic are stressful but for different reasons.  
"Both of the condition is equally stressful, but for different reasons. Before COVID-19, we had so many events and guests that we needed to handle. The production rarely becomes slow."  
"However, we are stressed during the pandemic due to lack of staffing. Many of the staff either quit the job or were fired." JSC1

#### 4.2 Stressful conditions faced during working in the pandemic

Three themes emerged for workers' stressful working conditions during the pandemic: work overload, unreasonable wages, and workflow changes.

##### Theme 1: Work Overload

Most of the respondents expressed that work overload has been the reason they are experiencing emotional stress working during the pandemic.

"We had to split the schedule into 4 days off and 4 days are working. It means the staff working needed to be split into two groups. The workload is too much for one person due to that." DC3

##### Theme 2: Unreasonable wages

Some of the respondents were upset that their salaries needed to be cut. They felt like the work they did was not worth the salary they gained.

"The salary was cut following the position that person held. Starting with the junior sous chef and above got a 50% cut of their salary. Demi Chef and below will get a 20% salary cut." JSC1

##### Theme 3: Workflow changes

Workflow changes happened due to the newly introduced rule and the standard operating procedure (SOP) they must abide. One of the respondents expressed that he was having emotional distress due to needing to be quarantined for a long time because he suffered the symptom of COVID-19, even though he was tested negative.

"I have been quarantined too many times because I had the symptoms of COVID-19. Even though I tested negative, I still need to be quarantined. Usually, I was quarantined for two weeks, but this one time, I was quarantined for almost one month. It affected my mental health so much." CDP1

#### 4.3 Reasons for not leaving the job

The respondents were asked why they did not quit their job because of the emotional stress they must bear. Two themes are extracted from their answer: limited job opportunities and bonded with the company.

##### Theme 1: Limited job opportunities

Most respondents said they chose to stay with the company due to the limited job opportunities. Some of them said that if there were a lot of opportunities, they would leave the job to work for something else.

"I honestly wanted to leave the job, but job opportunities now are minimal, and there are too many competitors out there since many of them have lost their job too. So, I chose to stay." CDP2

##### Theme 2: Bonded with company

Two of the eight respondents said that they had no intention to leave. The decision was said due to indebted to the company. They explained that they have stayed with the company for a long time and to show appreciation, they would prefer to stay.

"I have been working for this hotel for a long time, and during the pandemic, I was lucky to still get my salary in the full amount. I have no intention to leave for now." DC1

#### 4.4 Coping strategies with work stress during the pandemic

Question 3-6 was given to the respondents to discover the coping strategies used to cope with work during the pandemic. It is also used to discover how well the coping strategies helped them to cope.

##### 4.4.1 Activities during free time before the pandemic.

Three themes are extracted from this question: physical exercise, traveling, and spending time with family and friends.

Theme 1: Physical exercise

Two of the respondents said they used to do physical exercise as their way to release their stress before the pandemic.

*"I love going to the gym during my off days and free time to release my tension."* DC3

Theme 2: Travelling

Most of the respondents revealed that they love to go travel to help them wind up. Some of them love to ride their motorcycle, and others love to go sight-seeing.

*"I always went on a ride alone to other states such as Pahang and Melaka during my free time."* C2

Theme 3: Spend time with family and friends

The rest of the respondents stated that they spent their free time with family and friends before the pandemic.

*"I spent much time with my wife and kids at home."* JSC1

#### 4.4.2 New coping strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, a lot of new rules and SOP were announced by the government. Some of the activities the respondents used to do were not allowed to do during the pandemic. This question is used to discover other ways they use to release their emotional stress. Three themes were successfully extracted from this question: making self-busy, involving family activities, and social activity on social media.

Theme 1: Make self-busy

Two of the respondents use this as their new coping strategy. They distract themselves by working an extra job and starting a new business.

*"I started a home-based business by selling lasagne. On days where business is slow, I work as a delivery rider such as Food Panda, Lalamove, and Dahmakan."* C2

Theme 2: Involve with family activities

The other two respondents stated that they involve with family activities as a new coping strategy.

*"I spent time with my family at home, such as helping my wife gardening."* JSC1

Theme 3: Social activity on social media

The rest of the respondents said they socialize via social media to help them cope with emotional stress. This activity includes playing online games and listening to music.

*"I listen to a lot of music and play games whenever I am bored."* DC1

#### 4.4.3 Effectiveness of new coping strategies.

The last questionnaire question investigates whether the coping strategy effectively relieves their emotional stress. Two themes are extracted from this question: enjoy doing new coping strategies and mixed feelings about new coping strategies (enjoy/unhappy).

Theme 1: Enjoy doing existing coping strategies

Three of eight respondents enjoy doing their new coping strategies. They stated that it helps them cope with their emotional stress.

*"Yes, even though I can't go far since it was a very strict PKP like going back to my hometown in Selangor. But meeting my food delivery rider friends and getting to delivered foods are good enough to help me cope during that period. I am not a stay-at-home person and tend to get anxious."* DC2

Theme 2: Mixed feelings on existing coping strategies (enjoy/unhappy)

The rest of the respondents said they enjoyed the previous way of coping rather than the new ones. They stated that they still enjoy doing it but prefer to wind down using the old ways to cope.

*"Yes, but it cannot beat the fun I had when I played badminton and met my friends. Listening to songs and playing games alone can be a bit boring."* DC1

## 5. Discussion

Any profession, including the hospitality sector, has its advantages and disadvantages. It is safe to state that the recent emergence of new infectious diseases worldwide has impacted how everything operates. The government has implemented several rules and new SOPs, making this a novel experience for everyone, even hospitality professionals. These changes impacted them and their work, causing mental pain as they tried to acclimate to their

new circumstances. The current research was conducted to determine the source of work stress during the epidemic and how the hotel staff dealt with the stress. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data received from the interview.

This study shows that most respondents agree that working during the pandemic is more stressful than working before the pandemic. In a study by Yu et al. (2021), workplace stress was significantly influenced by perceived pandemic concerns. Suka et al. (2021) also supported that the percentage of people whose work style deteriorated was higher than the number of people who improved their work style during this outbreak. However, a respondent also felt that both before and during the pandemic were equally stressful, but for varied reasons. According to the respondents, a few reasons resulted in their emotional stress: work overload, unreasonable wages, and workflow changes. Work overload started when some staff was offered Voluntary Separation Scheme (VSS) or quit the job alone. The company offered VSS intending to downsize the staffing organization.

We understand that no travel was permitted under the Movement Control Order (MCO) era. It significantly influenced the hotel industry, creating significant losses and pushing them to downsize their employment to save money on pay. Due to the need to bear the pay cut resulting from unreasonable salaries, some workers voluntarily quit their jobs. As a result, the burden for the remaining employees is doubled. An article by (Cleeland, 2020) said that to decrease labor expenses, a rising number of companies in sectors afflicted by the coronavirus pandemic are opting for pay cuts rather than layoffs, hoping to preserve their workforces for a recovery. Finally, the COVID-19 epidemic has caused workflow changes. The government must proclaim many new sops to keep the virus from spreading. This document covers the SOP for all working staff, regardless of location. Masks must be worn in public places, and anyone with COVID-19 symptoms must be quarantined. The workers have found this to be a little annoying. Another worker mentioned that the kitchen staff must serve the visitors independently per the new SOP. To limit guest interaction with other guests, they must scoop the foods that guests want from the buffet.

The number of employees leaving their positions increased during the outbreak, and respondents were asked why they opted to stay. Most respondents said they chose to stay owing to a lack of job opportunities. Malaysia's unemployment rate has risen to 3.9 percent, the highest in a decade, as people's livelihoods have been harmed by COVID-19 (Manpower Staffing Services, 2021). Some of them have developed strong ties with their bosses, making it difficult for them to leave. The respondents believe they must stay to demonstrate their loyalty to the organization.

According to the respondents, people spent their spare time before the pandemic engaging in physical activity, travel, and spending time with family and friends. On their days off and after work, they usually play badminton or go to the gym. Physical activity can help you reduce stress and improve your mental and physical well-being (Robin, 2020). Most respondents choose to travel by motorcycling to another state or sight-seeing at a location such as a beach. Travel has been connected to stress reduction and has been shown to help with anxiety and depression symptoms (Dan, 2021). Furthermore, some revealed that they spent time with their family and friends to release stress. Going back to their hometown to try new restaurants was one of the activities that the respondents engaged. A study by Piedmont (2020) reported that people who use their family and friends to cope with stress are unlikely to approach harmful coping mechanisms such as drinking alcohol or smoking.

Respondents' coping mechanisms changed significantly during the pandemic. Due to the constraints, they have a limited number of activities to use as a coping mechanism. They have evolved a few new coping techniques over this time. To begin, making self-busy. Many began as part-time employees, such as food delivery riders for Food Panda, 'dahmakan,' Grab Food, and Lalamove. They even establish a food business from home. They did it partly to supplement their income and keep their mental health in check, as some of them dislike sitting at home doing nothing. Hazreen (2021) states that over 65,000 people in Malaysia joined the e-hailing during the pandemic, and 77% ventured to gain side income.

Furthermore, the respondents reported that they engaged in family activities throughout the pandemic to relieve their emotional stress. Because they live with their spouse and children, married persons are more likely to employ this coping approach. The respondent engaged in a variety of activities at home, including gardening and spending quality time with their children. Finally, the respondent stated that they engaged in social media activities such as online gaming, listening to music, and watching movies. The use of social media has always been a source of debate as to whether it provides more benefits or disadvantages to users. By overusing social media and placing

unnecessary stress on ourselves, we may be jeopardizing our mental health as well as our time (Bridges, 2018). Respondents who use social media as a coping method reported using it frequently throughout the day. Still, they did not overdo it because staring at a phone screen for extended periods causes them to become bored and exhausted. It demonstrates that it is not necessarily an imperfect coping mechanism if users know how to limit their time investigating it. Because it is difficult to meet with their friends physically, online gaming has aided the respondents in socializing with others.

The interview ended with a query about how practical the new coping approach is for them. Most of the staff have mixed emotions about its efficacy. They said the previous coping strategies worked better for the staff than the new ones. One thing they all have in common is a lack of social engagement. It can be supported by a study (Brody, 2017) that people who are socially isolated regularly basis are more prone to have high levels of stress and inflammation. This pattern can be seen in the respondents who enjoy doing their new coping strategy. Based on their answers, they have more physical interaction than the other respondents with mixed feelings.

In terms of academic significance, the finding of this study could provide information to researchers who have a similar interest in investigating mental health management among hospitality employees working during the pandemic era. In addition, the finding also helps future researchers understand how hospitality employees adapt their emotions in the work environment during this challenging situation. This study will undoubtedly be very impactful for the medical world, such as the Malaysia Ministry of Health (MOH) and Persatuan Psikologi Malaysia (PRISMA), to read about how hospitality workers release their job stress with minimal options. In addition, the findings will provide insight to relevant authorities such as the hotel management itself. Other authorities, such as the government, can use this research to develop a long-term plan to save the hospitality industry, which is the root of the problem.

Practically, this research is expected to motivate and educate other hospitality workers or other workers dealing with similar job stress problems on how they can cope. Furthermore, this study will reveal how effective the respondent's coping method is, allowing other workers to learn from it and apply it if it suits them. Hotel owners and business owners can see the issue and devise a strategy to assist their mentally ill employees. It will undoubtedly have a considerable influence if the workers can receive assistance. Finally, the results of this survey are supposed to reveal the respondents' expectations of the authorities.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the presence of Covid-19 significantly impacted the hospitality workers' mental health. The employees were also forced to produce creative ways to release their stress. Although there are many beneficial ways to cope, some people may choose to cope in negative ways, such as smoking, spending too much time on social media, or sleeping too much due to a lack of positive options. The authorities involved must be aware of the situation and devise a strategy to help people manage their emotional stress; otherwise, the number of people suffering from mental health problems will continue to rise.

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