Editorial: History, lessons, and ways forward from the COVID-19 pandemic

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1 Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic 2019 (COVID-19) has produced a shock to the world like no other. To provide a retrospective of the COVID-19 pandemic, this editorial sheds light on the *history* of and the *lessons* from the pandemic, as well as the latest research during the pandemic in the *International Journal of Quality and Innovation*. To provide an agenda post the COVID-19 pandemic, this editorial provides suggestions on measurement scales and research questions emerging from a retrospect of the pandemic. This editorial, which is a position or target article by nature (i.e., curation of ideas and debates), hopes that the insights curated herein can provide readers with a quick understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic and the future research avenues that avail post pandemic.

2 History

The COVID-19 pandemic:

- is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)
- emerged in late 2019 (and thus its label of '2019' or '19' in its name)
- was identified in Wuhan in December 2019 (though this may not necessarily be its origin, which is yet to be ascertained)
- was declared a public health emergence of international concern by the World Health Organization in January 2020
- was declared a pandemic (or an elevated status of public health emergence of international concern) by the World Health Organization in March 2020

- is fought using vaccines that can be pre-ordered from late 2020 and distributed worldwide from early 2021 onwards (World Health Organization, 2021).

Unlike many other pandemics (e.g., Ebola, H1N1, MERS, SARS), the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the world like no other – mainly due to its global presence and reach. In that sense, the COVID-19 pandemic is similar to the 1918 influenza pandemic (or more popularly known as the 'Spanish flu'), which occurred sometime between 1918 to 1920, infecting about a third of the world's population at that time (or about 500 million people), and taking the lives of up to 100 million people (Spreeuwenberg et al., 2018).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic is dissimilar to the 'Spanish flu' as it occurred at a time when:

- globalisation is at its peak (e.g., international trade and presence are omnipresent around the world)
- the fourth industrial revolution is proliferating (e.g., artificial intelligence and internet of things enabled through big data and blockchain technology), which suggest that the world is at a state that is more interconnected than ever
- the disruption that the pandemic creates is not limited to public health (e.g., lives) but also the economic health (e.g., earnings, jobs) of the world
- the solutions can be delivered with greater agility to a larger population (e.g., pandemic and vaccine developed in the same year, i.e., 2020).

3 Lessons

The COVID-19 pandemic provides several important lessons:

- *Economic health is dependent on public health.* The pandemic made clear that the health of a nation's economy is dependent on the health of its citizens. To a larger extent, the pandemic also made clear that the wellbeing of the world is dependent on the wellbeing of its people. Such clarity was prominent when economies around the world had to be paused when lockdown measures were imposed to control the spread of SARS-CoV-2. Though the measures of economic health are relatively well established, measured and communicated [e.g., consumer price index (CPI), gross domestic product (GDP), unemployment rate], especially during the pandemic, the measures of public health can be improved by going beyond traditional measures (e.g., mortality, vaccine efficacy) to more contemporary measures (e.g., emotional wellbeing and mental health), which can pose important implications for human capital and productivity in the economy.
- *Public health is a new and perhaps the most dramatic force in the macroenvironment, and it takes the combined efforts from the other macroenvironmental forces to remedy events brought by this dramatic force.* Unlike the usual political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal (PESTEL) forces in the macroenvironment, a public health crisis such as a pandemic can cause immediate and serious disruptions to an economy – the other forces tend to

incur a longer time lag before the impact could be felt. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the disruptions to the economy caused by a public health crisis cannot be addressed by any one force (e.g., technological) but rather by a combination of forces [e.g., political (e.g., political stability), economic (e.g., stimulus packages), social (e.g., social (physical) distancing practices), technological (e.g., remote living, studying and working technologies), environmental (e.g., alternative inputs), and legal (e.g., movement control restrictions)].

- *Technology adoption is accelerated during a crisis.* The COVID-19 pandemic made clear that economic health is as important as public health. Though the rich and privilege minority may place more importance on the latter as opposed to the former, the reality in the marketplace suggests that economic activities must continue in order for the majority to keep their jobs and survive. However, technology adoption, which is key to economic advancement, was one of the main struggles prevalent in economies and societies around the world prior to the pandemic – as technology diffusion requires change, but change is difficult, and thus attracts resistance. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic has arguably accelerated technology adoption (and associated social practices – e.g., online or remote living, study and work), most prominently through the use of technologies for online or remote activities (e.g., online shopping, mobile food delivery orders, learning management systems, tele or video-conferencing applications). In that sense, the struggles of technology diffusion have probably been accelerated by the pandemic – a bold estimation would be a fast forward of ten years.

4 Research

Recognising that the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global humanitarian crisis like no other as governments around the world have imposed lockdowns and movement control measures to contain the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and to safeguard the health and wellbeing of citizens, the *International Journal of Quality and Innovation* is keen on COVID-19 submissions that aim to shed light on the challenges and opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic has produced for a wide range of communities such as businesses, consumers, educators, families, governments and societies. In total, the journal received ten formal submissions (and many more informal enquiries) on COVID-19 but only three submissions managed to survive the publisher check and the peer review process and thus gained a publication spot in this issue (i.e., 30% acceptance and 70% rejection).

The research team consisting of Malhotra, Pandey, Pandey, and Patra from the Dyal Singh College, India, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Technical University, India, G.B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, India, and S.R.M. Institute of Science and Technology, India explored supply chain issues during the COVID-19 pandemic using the agriculture industry in India as a case. Their study found that agriculture harvest during the COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented challenges involving reaping and post-reaping tasks in agriculture supply chains. They attributed these challenges to the relocation of transient workers back to their hometowns during the pandemic lockdowns, which led to labor shortages and thus a halt in harvesting activities. Other challenges pertaining to climate change, occupational health and safety, pricing and revenue, and transportation were also identified. Their study concluded with a call for

multi-stakeholder collaborations to develop proactive frameworks to overcome these supply chain issues post pandemic.

The research team consisting of Islam, Igwe, Rahman, and Saif from Swinburne University of Technology (Sarawak), University of Lincoln (United Kingdom), and University of Dhaka (Bangladesh) examined remote working challenges and solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic using SMEs in Bangladesh as a case. Their study revealed that remote working challenges include financial constraints; bureaucracy in management; lack of knowledge and interest among employees; communication issues in the organization; high employee turnover; and the difficulty to find trustworthy employees in implementing remote working practices. To overcome these challenges, their study suggested solutions that involve convincing employees and employers of the benefits of remote working practices; having clear and pragmatic government rules and regulations; providing financial incentives to encourage remote work; and providing remote (online) training and IT courses to support remote work.

The research team consisting of Lafferty, MacCurtain, and McNamara from University of Limerick's Kemmy Business School and School of Education (Ireland) investigated the challenges and equivalent solutions of donning face masks for employee-service user interactions through the lens of emotional labor theory. Their study indicated that the use of face masks led to challenges pertaining to impaired communication in service interactions and increased customer anxiety and frustration. To overcome these challenges, their study recommended training (e.g., non-verbal feedback elicitation, role play – e.g., dealing with anxious service users, managing difficult situations) and cross-industrial sharing of knowledge (e.g., support systems).

Besides the three COVID-19 articles, this issue also includes an article that speak to the importance of quality infrastructure services (Demissie, Tsegaye, Beshah and Ebinger), which are important to support recovery post the COVID-19 pandemic.

5 Ways forward

To this end, this editorial makes clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought profound impacts to the functioning of economies and societies around the world. To move forward post pandemic, this editorial puts forth five suggestions pertaining to measurement scales and research questions based on an interactive process of brainstorming and reflection by the author over multiple days a week for a period of one month. The research questions can be contextualised and refined, whereas the measures can be adopted or adapted, validated, and tested as per usual methodological practice (e.g., pre-test > pilot study > main study > factor analysis > reliability analysis > other quantitative analysis – e.g., correlation, simple or multiple regression, co-variance or partial least squares structural equation modelling).

5.1 Public health anxiety

- Proposed conceptualisation or definition: The extent to which an individual is anxious due to public health events (e.g., pandemics).
- Proposed operationalisation or measures:
  1 The public health event (e.g., COVID-19) causes me to feel *anxious*.

2 The public health event (e.g., COVID-19) causes me to feel *concerned*.
3 The public health event (e.g., COVID-19) causes me to feel *nervous*.
4 The public health event (e.g., COVID-19) causes me to feel *uneasy*.
5 The public health event (e.g., COVID-19) causes me to feel *worried*.

- Proposed scale: Strongly disagree, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, strongly agree.
- Proposed research questions: How does public health anxiety affect purchase behaviour? How does public health anxiety affect job performance and satisfaction?

5.2 New normal

- Proposed conceptualisation or definition: The extent to which an individual experience permanent changes in life.
- Proposed operationalisation or measures:
  1 My life has changed (as compared to the past – e.g., one year ago).
  2 I am doing things differently (as compared to the past – e.g., one year ago).
  3 I am engaging in new practices (as compared to the past – e.g., one year ago).
  4 I have new routines (as compared to the past – e.g., one year ago).
  5 I am living in a new normal (as compared to the past – e.g., one year ago).
- Proposed scale: Strongly disagree, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, strongly agree.
- Proposed research questions: How does the new normal affect purchase behaviour? How does the new normal affect work arrangements?

5.3 Remote living/studying/working

- Proposed conceptualisation or definition: The extent to which an individual lives/works/studies in remote (or independent) environments.
- Proposed operationalisation or measures:
  1 I am living/studying/working independently at home (or remotely).
  2 I get most things done from home (or remotely).
  3 I get most things done without leaving home (or going out).
  4 I get most of the things I need using delivery services.
  5 I get most of the things I need using online services.
- Proposed scale: Strongly disagree, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, strongly agree.
- Proposed research questions: How does remote living/studying/working affect purchase behaviour? How does remote living/studying/working affect job performance and satisfaction?

5.4 Social (physical) distancing

- Proposed conceptualisation or definition: The extent to which an individual distances himself or herself physically from others.
- Proposed operationalisation or measures:
  1 I try to avoid close conversations with others.
  2 I try to avoid physical contact with others.
  3 I try to stay one metre away from others.
  4 I try to stay away from crowded spaces.
  5 I try to stay away from confined spaces.
- Proposed scale: Strongly disagree, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, strongly agree.
- Proposed research questions: How does social (physical) distancing affect purchase behaviour? How does social (physical) distancing affect work arrangements?

5.5 Technology continuance

- Proposed conceptualisation or definition: The extent to which an individual continues to use a technology.
- Proposed operationalisation or measures:
  1 I continue to use the technology (e.g., e-wallets).
  2 I have used the technology (e.g., e-wallets) for a long time (e.g., one year).
  3 I cannot imagine myself not using the technology (e.g., e-wallets) in the long run (e.g., the next three years).
  4 I cannot function (e.g., receive or send money) effectively without using the technology (e.g., e-wallets).
  5 The technology (e.g., e-wallets) is part and parcel of my life/study/work.
- Proposed scale: Strongly disagree, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, strongly agree.
- Proposed research questions: What influences technology continuance among buyers and sellers in the marketplace? What influences technology continuance at work?

6 Conclusions

In summary, this article has provided a retrospective of the COVID-19 pandemic, covering its history and lessons learnt. The article has also introduced the articles that were submitted, reviewed, accepted, and published during the pandemic in the *International Journal of Quality and Innovation*, thereby providing the latest insights in the field. Finally, the article has provided several ways forward in the form of suggestions for measurement scales and research questions on public health anxiety; new normal; remote living, studying, and working; social (physical) distancing; and technology continuance, which the author opines to be most pertinent for research post pandemic.

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Appendix

Further reading

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Notes

- Guidelines for predictive and prescriptive primary and secondary research can be found in Lim's (2021) research note.
- Guidelines for experimental research can be found in Lim's (2015) and Lim et al.'s (2019) methodological articles.
- Guidelines to challenge mainstream assumptions can be found in Lim et al.'s (2021) post-publication review.
- Exemplar of proposing new theory (e.g., theory of behavioural control) can be found in Lim and Weissmann's (2021) meta-systematic review (i.e., systematic review of systematic reviews).
- Past topics covered in the *International Journal of Quality and Innovation* can be found in Lim's (2019) seminal review of the journal's ten-years run.