Social support and perceived uncertainties during COVID-19: Consequences for employees' wellbeing

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Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis has drastically affected organizations worldwide, thereby influencing the employees' psychological wellbeing. Since it is a new pandemic, research is sparse in the domain of employees' psychological wellbeing in relation to the phenomenon. Drawing on social support and job demand-resource perspectives, this research adds to the factors affecting employees' wellbeing due to the coronavirus outbreak. Specifically, this study is an investigation of co-workers' instrumental support in predicting employees' emotional exhaustion via employees' perceived uncertainties experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, we tested for the contextual specificity of family support on uncertainties and its link with employees' emotional exhaustion. With data drawn from two universities (n = 275), the findings reveal a negative association between co-worker task support and an employee's emotional exhaustion, and an employee's perceived uncertainties mediate this relationship. Moreover, the moderating analysis exhibits that family support mitigates the negative effect of uncertainty perception on emotional exhaustion. Our study reveals that coworker and family support are extremely important during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are equally valuable for organizations and society to mitigate the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on employees' wellbeing.

Keywords Social support · Perceived uncertainties · Emotional exhaustion · COVID-19 · JD-R model

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had substantial impacts on business organizations worldwide. Specifically, the crisis has started to significantly influence businesses' processes and activities in every sector (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; McKibbin & Fernando, 2020). As a result this pandemic has prompted financial fears for contemporary organizations, and enormously affects their work patterns and employees' psychological wellbeing (Hamouche, 2020). The pandemic's adverse impact is also witnessed in educational institutions (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Sahu, 2020), causing tremendous disruption to the education sector globally (UNESCO, 2020). In particular, private sector educational institutions (PSEIs) tend to be the most vulnerable. Their revenue and operations are heavily dependent on student admissions, and in some countries, such as Pakistan, financial assistance is not provided from the government's higher education commission (HEC), in contrast to Pakistan's public sector educational institutions. The enforcement of strict lockdown results in at least two

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negative consequences for PSEIs, i.e., a short time to advertise for new admissions and a sharp downfall in new student enrolment numbers.

Consequently, PSEIs face financial difficulties to continue their operations smoothly and this causes numerous uncertainties for employees (DePietro, 2020). Moreover, as educational institutions have shifted online, it is most likely that PSEIs may be equire to minimize their financial constraints by cutting the number of their employees (DePietro, 2020), which may engender high pressure and insecurity among these employees (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020). Knowing this, employees are most probably prone to high anxiety and stress levels. It is of the utmost significance to explore organizational variables that likely mitigate the pandemic's adverse impact on employees' psychological stress levels (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020). Given that the COVID-19 outbreak is a newly crisis, scholarly efforts to clarify how and when the pandemic is most likely to influence employees' psychological wellbeing are still very sparse.

Therefore, this study, based on PSEIs in Pakistan, has two objectives. First, based on the social support (Amason et al., 1999) perspective, we argue the benefits of co-workers' support in lowering employees' perceived uncertainties and its impact on their emotional exhaustion evolving from the crisis. Second, even though co-workers' support is available, employees may still feel vulnerable, as soon the crisis exists. Therefore, relying on the job demand-resource theory (JD-R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), in this study we seek to investigate the contextual specificity of perceived social support, in terms of family support, which might buffer the relationship between an employee's uncertainties and that individual's wellbeing. Social support, which is the experience or perception that one is cared for, honored, and part of a jointly supportive social network (Taylor, 2011), is considered an essential contextual resource used to mitigate the degree of one's stress and anxiety (Hobfoll, 2002; Jang et al., 2018). Further, in a collectivist society such as Pakistan (Hofstede, 2001), we expect a high level of belonging to a group, caring for and supporting each other, resulting in lessening the detrimental effect of individuals' perceived uncertainties on their emotional exhaustion (see Fig. 1).

Taken together, the current study enriches the body of knowledge regarding social support and its consequences on employees' wellbeing during the COVID-19 outbreak. From a practical perspective, this study's findings offer valuable insights for organizations and the general society that might help alleviate the harmful effects of the crisis on individuals.

Review of Literature

Employees' Perceived Uncertainties in PSEIs

Coombs and colleagues define a crisis as "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operation and poses a financial and reputational threat (Coombs & Holladay, 2005, p. 264)." The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, which means a disease outbreak threatening the whole world. While this emergent global crisis adversely affects economies worldwide, it also affects psychological wellbeing at the individual level (Shigemura et al., 2020). Specifically, a crisis's psychological impact on individuals exists typically in the kind of uncertainties (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020) which are referred to as "an individual's perceived inability to predict something accurately" (Milliken, 1987, p. 136).

The recent COVID-19 crisis generates uncertainties among employees across all sectors. In particular, we argue that this coronavirus pandemic has drastically affected PSEIs' employees for several reasons. First, due to the strict lockdown, new admissions were not allowed; hence, student enrolments have dropped enormously. Second, given that students constitute PSEIs' primary source of income, the drop in new admissions has likely engendered a feeling of job insecurity amid employees (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020) due to the possibility of downsizing. Likewise, as the HEC does not provides financial funds to PSEIs, it is more likely to either cut off the basic salary or asks employees to wait at home without any pay (a kind of forced leave) until the crisis ends. Third, the faculty, management and other staff members must design strategies to ensure timely online classes and collect all due assignments from students.

Moreover, all departments should answer queries from students and their parents. However, sadly, the internet's quality especially in remote areas remains a major issue in the country.; This makes it extremely difficult to address all these issues in a timely way, adding serious problems to employees' mental health. Fourth, these days, employees are mostly working from home. In addition to job demands, employees' family demands make home-based work challenging, resulting in their psychological strain. Altogether, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven a crisis for employees of PSEIs, because it causes a sense of uncertainty and insecurity, which consequently leads them to deteriorated psychological wellbeing.

Co-Worker Task Support and Emotional Exhaustion

Social support is generally defined as the employee's belief that help would be available from others in demanding conditions (Mayo et al., 2012). Social support is considered a type of workplace stress intervention since it generates perceptions of emotional attention and support from others and this offers solutions to issues (Park et al., 2004). In particular, co-worker behaviors such as incivility (Zhou et al., 2019) or support (Eva et al. 2019) often have a significant impact on an individual, compared to the impact of similar behaviors by a supervisor, client, or customer (Thompson et al., 2020). Moreover, co-workers play an important role in daily work activities, which

Fig. 1 Theoretical framework
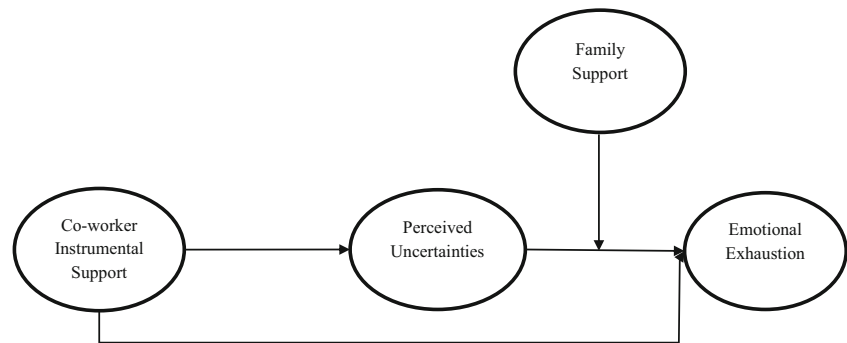
helps individuals resolve job-relevant difficulties and decrease burnout (Karatepe et al., 2010; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Beehr et al. (2000) propose investigating the two forms of co-worker support (i.e., emotional and instrumental/task) individually to understand the influence better.

Our study only takes into account the task support defined as "helping people get something done" (Beehr et al., 2000, p. 393) provided by co-workers at work. This is because COVID-19 abruptly upended normal work routines, involving the shift of work to virtual or online environments, so employees are facing issues in working according to new guidelines. Notably, in the study context, most employees are not familiar with internet usage, and therefore faced many difficulties in fulfilling their institutions' assigned tasks. Moreover, many employees may not possess their own computers and devices with which to write, give feedback, or answer through email. We argue that all these problems in this global pandemic may cause extra workload and employee strain. In this scenario, the co-worker's task support is relevant to the study because instrumental support helps mitigate possible adverse outcomes such as job stress and turnover, and workload (Self et al., 2020; Tews et al., 2013). Based on these findings and arguments, we suggest that, in the current situation where most employees work from home, co-worker support is more critical than ever. Keep noted that employees possess different expertise, hence the support they provide each other could fuel the confidence that they can overcome any knowledge-related deficiencies (Amarneh et al., 2010). Further, they may feel more energized to cope with problems in performing their job tasks (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2017), hence this is likely to mitigate their stress levels.

To further clarify co-worker support's effect, we turn to social support theory (Amason et al., 1999) to understand how such support during COVID-19 pandemic might reduce an employee's emotional exhaustion. According to this view, social support protects individuals from the detrimental influence of stressful events; it affects what they perceive and how to manage these stressful happenings (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). Social support refers to the readiness to provide material and psychological resources intended to build an individual's capability to tackle stressful situations (Amason et al., 1999). Therefore, we

suggest that co-worker instrumental support would be more crucial in reducing emotional exhaustion during the COVID-19 crisis than emotional co-worker support. In line with this argument, a recent study (Charoensukmongkol et al., 2016) contended that supervisor and co-worker social support help employees reduce their emotional exhaustion and enhances their satisfaction. We therefore hypothesize the following:

> Hypothesis 1: There is a negative relationship between co-worker task support and employees' emotional exhaustion.

Co-Worker Task Support, Perceived Uncertainties, and Emotional Exhaustion

Generally, uncertainty during a crisis about events and their consequences is likely to make individuals feel doubtful about the probability of an organization's continued existence or the form that future existence could take, and as a result, the expected outcomes for themselves (Bordia et al., 2004). One study (Bastien, 1987) revealed that uncertainty perceptions in a crisis can result in worry of loss due to its negative impact on an individual's locus of control. Likewise, a recent study has shown that uncertainties regarding the COVID-19 crisis lead people toward emotional exhaustion (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020). Moreover, in an uncertain situation involving a crisis, employees are unable to prepare in a timely way nor to cope with the unknown in an effective manner (Bordia et al., 2004). As the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered several unprecedented trends that have altered the teaching and working methods of the employees working in educational institutions, employees may feel anxious about their situation and emotionally exhausted.

Usually, social support (i.e., supervisor and co-worker support) is considered crucial for individuals' outcomes in organizations. However, during the COVID-19 crisis, employees are working from their homes, so it seems more relevant to explore co-worker support (belief in colleagues' readiness to assist in performing workplace obligations) (Akgunduz & Eryilmaz, 2018) than supervisor support. This is because support from

co-workers involves encouraging and sharing specialist knowledge and experiences with colleagues (Zhou & George, 2001). Numerous studies have shown the positive consequences of co-worker support in the work context, such as enhancing job satisfaction, lowering work-related stress, and mitigating the intention to quit (Charoensukmongkol et al., 2016; Koseoglu et al., 2018). On the other hand, reserchers have revealed that if the co-workers appear unwilling to help employees in their job duties, this may drain employees' energy resources and engender feelings of abandonment and frustration (Sliter et al., 2012). In a similar vein, supervisor support (a kind of social support) helps workers by giving information that reduces their worries regarding perceived uncertainty (Skiba & Wildman, 2019). Hence, we argue that co-worker support in the form of sharing knowledge and experiences (Zhou & George, 2001) would also reduce uncertainties, which in turn, attenuates employees' emotional exhaustion.

This argument can further be supported through the JD-R view. JD-R theory suggests that an employee's perception of their own stress level can be mitigated when employees possess enough job resources (favorable conditions and social support that facilitate individuals to handle the job demands) to cope with their assigned job demands (physical or psychological features of a job that cause psychological strain) (De Jonge and Dormann 2003). In particular, in recent studies it has been noted that during a crisis (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic), employees' high degree of perceived uncertainties can be viewed as a job demand that makes individuals feel anxious and doubtful regarding their job situation, subsequently leading them toward emotional exhaustion (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Skiba & Wildman, 2019). Social support in the form of one's supervisor has been shown to lessen employees' uncertainty concerns during the crisis (e.g., Blanco-Donoso et al., 2019; Skiba & Wildman, 2019). However, the importance of co-worker support in the work context is still mostly unexpolored. Based on JD-R theory, it can be suggested that support from one's co-worker can directly decrease employees' uncertainty perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Knowing that perceived uncertainties result in employees' emotional exhaustion (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020), we argue that co-worker support may also alleviate emotional exhaustion via the underlying mechanism of perceived uncertainties. Hence, the following hypothesis is presented:

> Hypothesis 2: Perceived uncertainties will mediate the negative relationship between co-worker task support and employees' emotional exhaustion.

Moderation of Family Support

Although it is suggested that social support (i.e., co-worker task support) reduces employees' emotional exhaustion via perceived uncertainties, this advantage is likely to narrow or broaden due to features present in the family context. Therefore, we study the contextual specificity effect of family support (the perception that one's family is willing and readily able to support each other in times of adversities) (Julkunen & Greenglass, 1989), to further clarify the relationship among the study variables. It is essential to study family support as a protective factor because multiple industries have taken a hit due to COVID-19, resulting in millions of workers being furloughed or asked to work from their homes. Consequently, employees spend most of their time at home.

Further, in the current crisis, the family context is important to study for two specific reasons. First, family support should lessen an employee's perception of uncertainties by offering him or her social capital. Social capital encompasses crucial interpersonal relationships that serve as a positive resource for employees, for example, employees' parents providing support to their toddlers in coping with academic issues (Coleman, 1988). It is well documented in prior studies that social support is negatively related to negative outcomes (Chang et al., 2017; Hirsch & Barton, 2011). Second, we argue that the family's support should also buffer the harmful consequences linked with negative variables such as perceived uncertainties on emotional exhaustion among university employees. That is, among those employees who perceive uncertainties, a lower level of emotional exhaustion is much more likely to be observed among those with high family support, compared to those with low support from their family.

Furthermore, according to Cohen and Wills (1985), social support can thwart stress by making exposure to an alarming situation less deleterious or by offering resources to cope with the stress. The JD-R (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) model can provide theoretical support for the buffering relationship. According to this theory, a stressor (an event or a stimulus) can drain energy and amplify the degree of strain. At the same time, job resources can guard individuals from stresses that are linked to the depletion of resources. As perceived uncertainty nurtures a stressor and family support works as a job resource, we therefore argue that family support may buffer the deleterious effect of perceived uncertainties. Hence, we suggest that support from one,'s family will buffer the adverse relationship between perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion.

> Hypothesis 3: The level of family support moderates the effect of perceived uncertainties on employees' emotional exhaustion.

Methodology

Study Context and Sample Procedure

The respondents were recruited from two large private universities in Pakistan during the national lockdown between

May and June 2020. We chose these two universities for three reasons. First, both were private education institutes. Second, both universities had several sub-campuses across the country; hence, maximum participant availability was expected. Third, both universities were passing through a tremendous decline in new enrolment due to the COVID-19 crisis, resulting in a substantial decrease in their incomes.

Consequently, the downfall in revenue caused serious threats to the employees' job security concerns, as universities faced challenges to manage all their ongoing expenses with limited financial resources. The universities initiated three strategies to cope with the situation: they started downsizing, they released employees for an unidentified time without pay, and they cut employees' basic salaries. All these acts contributed toward employees' greater uncertainty about their job security. Notably, as the COVID-19 crisis was unprecedented, it also made the employees unclear about their work patterns and increased their workload. Furthermore, as the traditional work pattern (i.e., teaching, seminars, workshops, etc.) has to be carried out online, this has added difficulties and confusion to employees who are unfamiliar with these new teaching protocols. However, even though teaching and a few other work practices have moved online, other employees are still required to present physically and do the necessary administrative work, thereby making them worried about contracting the virus while traveling. These uncertainties encountered due to the current pandemic make employees extremely vulnerable to emotional exhaustion.

Initially, 413 employees were invited from both universities to contribute to the study. Prior to data gathering, permission was granted from the top management of both universities. Accordingly, email contacts were provided by the program coordinator offices. In the beginning, we sent out an email asking for employees' willingness to participate in the study over three time lags. Once we receive their positive replies, we forwarded the first part of the survey through employees' emails with a cover letter, ensuring confidentiality concerns and explaining the purpose of the study. The online survey method was employed for two reasons: first, using an online survey guarantees a reduction in social desirability bias and confirms individuals' privacy (Cheyne & Ritter, 2001; Lim, 2002). Second, due to the strict lockdown, transportation was not allowed; hence, we could not physically collect the data. Of the 413 questionnaires sent out, 275 valid surveys were received, yielding a valid response rate of 66%. Among the respondents in the final sample, 69.4% were male, and 64.7% were educated at the Master's degree level or below. The participants' demographic information is listed in Table 1.

Measures

Co-Worker Task Support We assessed co-worker task support on a scale adapted from Settoon and Mossholder (2002) with five items. This measure has also been validated by prior studies (see e.g. Xu et al., 2018). Example items included: "My co-workers assist me with heavy workloads" and "My co-workers help me out when things get demanding." Each item's response format was rated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = (strongly disagree) to 5 = (strongly agree). The scale's Cronbach's alpha value was 0.93.

Perceived Uncertainties We implemented the 10-item perceived uncertainties scale developed by Allen et al. (2007) and modified by Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn (2020), adapted according to the COVID-19 crisis. Example items included: "Whether your pay, salary, and possibility of a promotion will be affected" and "The fear that you will get a COVID-19 infection." Items were assessed employing a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = (very certain) to 5 = (very uncertain). The scale's Cronbach's alpha value was 0.90.

Family Support Family support was assessed using an 8-item scale, adapted from the family support inventory for workers (King et al., 1995). This measurement contains items on instrumental (α = .85) and emotional support (α = .80) and has been widely adopted and validated in prior studies (e.g., Wayne et al., 2006). Example items were: "When something at work is bothering me, members of my family show that they understand how I am feeling" and "If my job gets very demanding, someone in my family takes on extra household

Table 1 Respondents' demographics

Variables	Classification	%
Gender	Male	69.4
	Female	30.6
Age (in years)	<31	34.2
	31–35	38.9
	36–40	12.7
	>40	14.2
Education	Bachelor	21.8
	Master	42.9
	PhD	26.5
	Postdoctoral	8.7
Experience (in years)	<1	10.5
	1–5	43.3
	6–10	24.4
	>10	21.8
Job type	Faculty	65.5
	Other staff	34.5

responsibilities." The items were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = (strongly disagree) to 5 = (strongly agree).

Emotional Exhaustion An employee's emotional exhaustion was measured with a 9-item tool from Maslach and Jackson (1981). Example items were: "I feel burned out from my work" and "I feel emotionally drained from my work." The items were anchored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = (strongly disagree) to 5 = (strongly agree). Alpha reliability for the scale was 0.92, as Maslach and Jackson (1981) reported and extensively validated by other studies (Akbar & Akhtar, 2018).

Control Variables Previous studies highlighted some influence of demographic variables on emotional exhaustion, i.e., age, gender, education and experience (Bekker et al., 2005; Karatepe & Aleshinloye, 2009). Therefore, we also controlled for these in our study. Moreover, the demographic variables were categorized by following recent studies' methodologies (Ghani et al., 2020; Usman et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

To check our study measurement and structural model, the researchers utilized structural equation modeling (SEM) employing the AMOS (Version 20.0) software. SEM is a powerful statistical technique which combines both confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and regression analysis to simultaneously assess the measurement and the structural model (Hair et al., 2010). Further, AMOS is also well equipped to deal with formative measures and moderating relationships. To scholars such as von der Heidt and Scott (2012), AMOS is not merely capable of articulating a formative model for latent constructs but also demands specific requirements to validate a study model and then demonstrate the graphical elucidation (Ali et al., 2020; Hair et al., 2011). Hence, we employed AMOS 20.0 software to test both the CFA and the structural model in our research to test the proposed hypotheses.

Results

Measurement Tests

Common method variance (CMV) was conducted using approaches suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003). First, we ran the Harman single factor analysis (Harman, 1976). The findings depict that 36.54% variance of the total variance is explained by a single factor, which was less than the cut-off value of 50%, thus indicating CMV is not a problem. Second, we compared all constructs' inter-correlations and

did not find high correlations (r > .90) among the constructs, thus confirming that our research is free from CMV.

We endeavored to ensure the instrument validity and reliability, i.e., discriminant and convergent validity, through Cronbach's alpha (CA), composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) and factor loadings by following the guidelines of Hair et al. (2007) and Fornell and Larcker (1981). As Table 2 indicates, the values of CA (.907 to .954), CR (.904 to .953) and AVE (.629 to .671) are in the acceptable range and successfully meet the cut-off criteria of validity and reliability. Similarly, the values of factor loadings are above .70 and attain the threshold criteria of .60 for sufficient convergent validity of scales, as suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999). Moreover, the AVEs' square roots for all variables are also higher than the inter-correlations of all variables, thereby suggesting a robust discriminant validity for scales (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Thus, all these statistics illustrate that the study measures are reliable and valid so that it is possible to confidently to perform the relationship-based analysis. These techniques are used commonly by current researchers to determine reliability and validity (Islam et al., 2020; Kiani et al., 2020).

Correlation Results

Table 3 demonstrates descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among the study variables. The results suggest that all the relationships are in the expected directions. The correlation results also demonstrate that none of the demographic variables has a significant relationship with the study variables. Moreover, we ran an ANOVA test to assess whether there is a significant difference in the study variables regarding age, gender, education, experience and job type. This showed no significant difference among study variables with respect to age, gender, education, experience and job type. Therefore, our results were essentially equivalent with or without these control variables (Bekker et al., 2005). All the inter-correlations among variables were in the suggested directions.

Structural Equation Modeling and Hypotheses Testing

The measurement model was run in AMOS to confirm the suggested measurement model fitness. In doing so, we connected the variables' items to their relevant variables and created a multi-dimensional model. The measurement model outcomes indicate that the measurement model substantially attained the model fitness indices criteria defined by Hu and Bentler (1999) and Hair et al. (2007). Thus, our model is a good fit, acceptable and well fitted to the data-set ($\chi2/df$ = 2.532, CFI = .921, SRMR = .045, and RMSEA = 0.075). Further, following the recommendation of Anderson and

Table 2 Confirmatory factor analysis

Variables	Items	Factor Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Co-worker Instrumental Support	CIS1	.763	.907	.910	.629
	CIS2	.878			
	CIS3	.702			
	CIS4	.782			
	CIS5	.860			
	CIS6	.760			
Family Support	FS1	.866	.943	.940	.662
	FS2	.836			
	FS3	.813			
	FS4	.823			
	FS5	.742			
	FS6	.811			
	FS7	.802			
	FS8	.811			
Perceived Uncertainties	PU1	.858	.954	.953	.671
	PU2	.806			
	PU3	.841			
	PU4	.731			
	PU5	.794			
	PU6	.859			
	PU7	.835			
	PU8	.792			
	PU9	.807			
	PU10	.861			
Emotional Exhaustion	EE1	.822	.912	.904	.653
	EE2	.841			
	EE3	.846			
	EE4	.797			
	EE5	.729			

Note: *CA* Cronbach's Alpha, *CR* Composite Reliability, *AVE* Average Variance Extracted

Gerbing (1988), we also evaluated the five alternative models, which fitted less well than the overall measurement model (four factor model) (see Table 4).

After the acceptance of the measurement model, it was converted into a structural model to validate whether the structural model fitted or not. The results indicate that the structural

Table 3 Means, standard deviations, and correlations results

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.Gender	1.48	.50	1								
2.Age	2.07	1.02	−.258**	1							
3.Education	2.22	.89	−.181**	.545**	1						
4.Experience	2.57	.95	−.056	.110	.035	1					
5.Job type	0.65	.48	.365**	−.207**	−.328**	.078	1				
6.CIS	3.63	.95	.137*	.016	.010	.023	.025	(.793)			
7.FS	3.53	.83	.082	.061	.064	−.011	.075	.332**	(.814)		
8.PU	2.61	1.05	−.089	.007	−.073	.076	.051	−.287**	−.372**	(.819)	
9.EE	2.64	.84	.019	−.002	−.002	.058	−.016	−.363**	−.349**	.253**	(.808)

Note: **p < .01, *p < .05, *CIS* Co-worker Instrumental Support, *FS* Family Support, *PU* Perceived Uncertainty, *EE* Emotional Exhaustion. The values in bracket are the square root of AVE.

model substantially attained the model fitness indices ($\chi2$/df = 2.692, CFI = .934, SRMR = .039 and RMSEA = 0.079), as defined by Hu and Bentler (1999) and Hair et al. (2007). We then calculated standardized path coefficients using the maximum likelihood method in AMOS to confirm the proposed structured relationships (see Fig. 2). Results confirm the positive effect of co-worker task support (β = −.348, p < .01) on emotional exhaustion, hence H1 is supported. To check the mediation's significance value, we calculated the bootstrap interval of the indirect effect of co-worker task support on emotional exhaustion through perceived uncertainties (β = −.048, 95% Bootstrap Confidence Interval [−.108; −.007]). This interval does not include 0; hence, the mediation was significant and H2 was also accepted.

Moreover, Fig. 2 shows that family support significantly moderates the positive relationship between perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion as the interaction term (perceived uncertainties x family support) is significant (β = −.216, p < 0.01, see Fig. 2), which supports H3. Further, family support was split into high (+1 SD) and low (−1 SD) levels to examine the nature of interaction effects. The positive association between perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion is weaker and insignificant (β = −.064, t = −.905, p > .05) when family support is high. However, this relationship is stronger (β = .368, t = 11.637, p < .001) when family support is low. These findings provide support for the moderation hypothesis (see Fig. 3).

Discussion

Building on the social support and JD-R theoretical perspectives, the findings show evidence for co-worker support's key role in reducing the uncertainties perception and emotional exhaustion that an individual experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic. As predicted, our findings are aligned with the hypothesized model. More specifically, the results demonstrate a significant negative relationship between co-worker

instrumental support and emotional exhaustion via the underlying mechanism of perceived uncertainties. Based on JD-R, we also examined family support as a contextual level moderator between perceived uncertainties and an employee's emotional exhaustion.

Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to the social support and JD-R theoretical perspectives on several grounds. Following the social support tenets, the results show that, in the COVID-19 crisis, co-worker task support is particularly crucial to cope with the stress caused by uncertainties due to crisis (Amason et al., 1999). Contrary to the previous findings that co-worker instrumental support leads to adverse outcomes such as turnover (Tews et al., 2013), our results reveal that task support from co-workers helps employees to lessen their emotional exhaustion. Since co-worker support is more critical than support from others such as supervisors in the workplace (Thompson et al., 2020) who play an essential role in solving job-related difficulties (Karatepe et al., 2010), it can promote the employee's wellbeing by lessening the intensity of uncertainties perceived during crisis. Based on the social support view, this study adds to the evidence that instrumental support from co-workers can work as a crucial job resource that helps employees mitigate the impact of work demands created by uncertainty perception developed because of COVID-19 (Skiba & Wildman, 2019). Generally, these findings are in line with those of prior researchers who regard social support as a management practice to assist employees in dealing with work stress effectively (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Sochos et al., 2012).

One important contribution of this study is the introduction of family support as a contextually specific buffer for the relationship between an employee's perceived uncertainty and his or her emotional exhaustion. Notably, while social support is usually understood to be one of the key moderating elements in stress management studies (Sprigg et al., 2019),

Table 4 Alternative measurement models

Model types	χ^2 (df), p	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	Comparison of alternative models with four factor model
Four factor model (Measurement Model)	929.295 (367), p<.001	.921	.045	.075	
Three factor alternative model 1 (CIS+FS, PU, EE)	1662.396 (370), p<.001	.817	.112	.113	733.101 (3), p<.001
Three factor alternative model 2 (CIS+PU, FS, EE)	1797.201 (370), p<.001	.798	.152	.119	134.805 (0), p<.001
Two factor alternative model (CIS+FS+PU, EE)	2803.977 (372), p<.001	.656	.183	.154	1006.776 (2), p<.001
One factor alternative model (CIS+FS+PU+EE)	3527.451 (373), p<.001	.554	.189	.176	723.474 (1), p<.001

Note: *CIS* Co-worker Instrumental Support, *FS* Family Support, *PU* Perceived Uncertainty, *EE* Emotional Exhaustion

Fig. 2 Results of model test


*p<.05, **p<.01
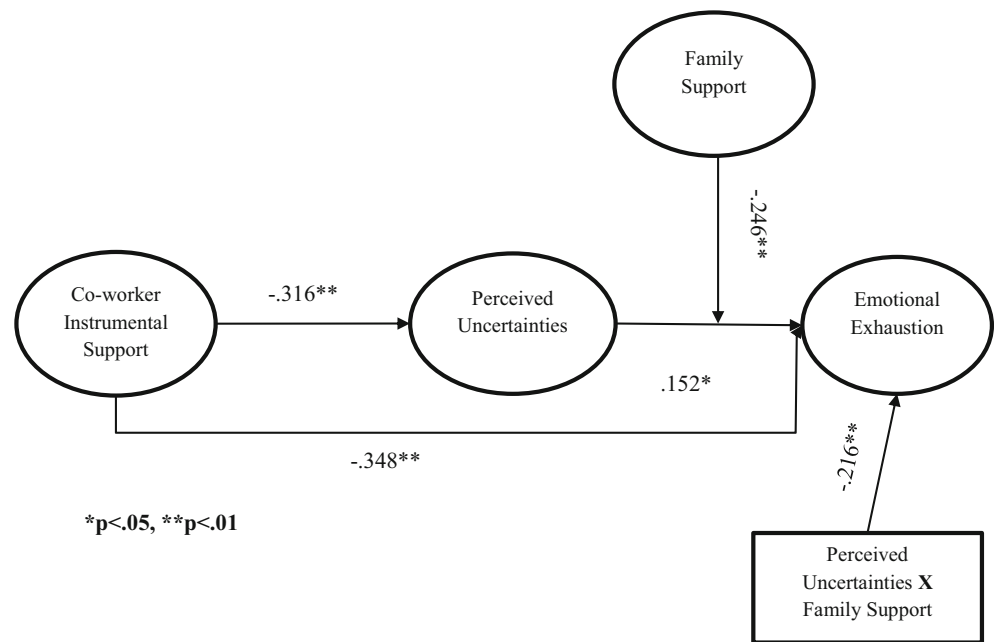
ourreseaerch makes a significant contribution to JD-R theory. It pinpoints the potential buffers of negative perceived uncertainties' effects associated with increased emotional exhaustion by examining the moderating role of family support. This is important because it is more likely that the features present in the family context would either limit or widen the advantage of task support provided by co-workers. Since, due to COVID-19, employees are performing job duties while staying at home, family support (the perception that one's family is willing and readily able to support each other in times of adversities) (Julkunen & Greenglass, 1989) is much more necessary. Our research shows that the quality of care received from one's family is extremely important in buffering

the perceived uncertainties in work created due to the COVID-19 pandemic and employee's wellbeing.

Implications for Management and Society

The current study offers recommendations for managers to design policies to cope with the global issue of COVID-19 and mitigate its adverse effect on employees' psychological wellbeing. Co-workers' instrumental support was shown to decrease employees' uncertainty perception and emotional exhaustion. Because of this, top management needs to encourage employees to help others in difficult times. The management should also associate some tangible benefits to

Fig. 3 Moderation effect of family support between the relationship of perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion
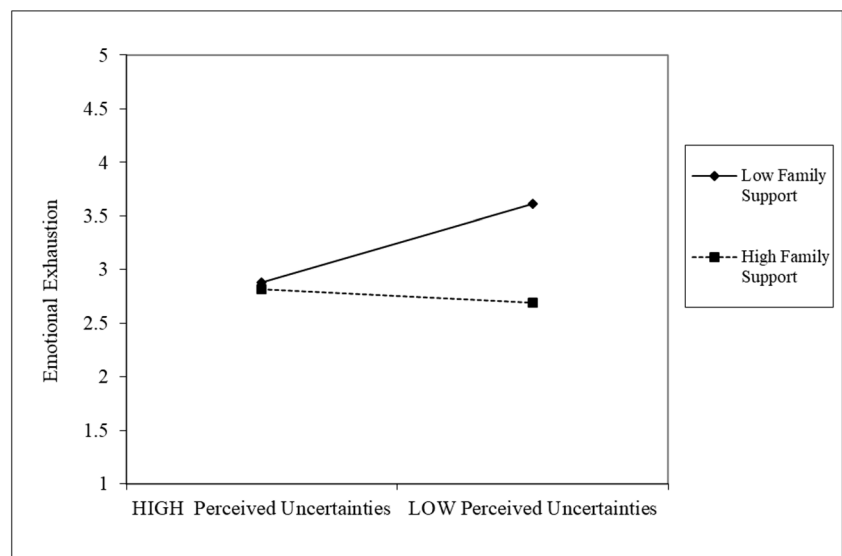
supporting each other, so the culture to support co-workers further flourishes. Since the levels of supervisors' and co-workers' support may improve via conducting specific communication workshops (Butow et al., 2008), it would be important to provide such opportunities among co-workers for enhancing support in times of crisis. Moreover, along with training workshops (where employees should be motivated to share with their co-workers their experiences, skills and strategies in coping with a crisis effectively), employees should encourage each other by the development of a robust set of standards that boost friendly and positive interaction among co-workers.

Importantly, as the current pandemic is a source of extreme stress for the whole population, society's role in deling with it increases. The present study posits that family support plays an essential role in buffering the negative relationship between perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion. Therefore, it is recommended that to minimize the detrimental effect of COVID-19 on employees' wellbeing, family support should be recognized globally. These findings suggest that during a crisis, to improve employees' wellbeing, it seems more appealing them that family members to listen to their work concerns and make them feel that their job is more important than helping out with household responsibilities during stressful events.

Limitation and Future Directions

While offering insightful findings, our study does not lack limitations, which should be taken into account in its interpretations. First, our research relies entirely on self-reported data. We recognize that cross-sectional data impedes the possibility of building causal inferences about the relationships among the variables examined in the study. Hence, a longitudinal study approach in future research would be important to provide more confidence in our ability to make causal inferences. Second, while the nature of the current study variables renders the use of self-reported responses suitable, relying entirely on self-reports raises the issue of whether the findings might have been overstated due to CMV. Thus, future researchers should further mitigate CMV's potential by augmenting the self-reports with reports from other sources, such as supervisors' responses. However, the CMV issue was addressed by following specific procedural and statistical measures. First, questionnaires were sent out through emails, which is more likely to reduce social desirability biases and confirm confidentiality (Cheyne & Ritter, 2001; Lim, 2002). Second, the result of the Harman's single factor test reveals that CMV was not an issue in this study.

Our third limitation is that we used samples drawn from only two private universities, with a relatively small sample size. This can affect the generalizability of our research findings. Future studies should focus on more diverse sectors and

large sample sizes to further generalize this study's results. Finally, Pakistan ranks as a highly collectivist society, and therefore, this may affect the extent to which family support was found to have a significant buffering role. The replication of the current model in far less collectivist societies might yield different findings.

Conclusion

In summary, based on the social support view, in this study, we found evidence for the positive role of co-worker instrumental support on emotional exhaustion, mediated via perceived uncertainties. Further, relying on the JD-R model, our findings add important value to the existing literature by considering the boundary condition of family support that weakens the negative relationship between uncertainties and employees' emotional exhaustion. Organizations need to nurture a work environment that encourages co-worker support at a time of crisis and hence, safeguards employees from being emotionally devastated. Society should also come forward in a crisis to support their family members in times of difficulty.

Declarations

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest All the authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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