DEALING WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND WORK PERFORMANCE AMONG FRONTLINE HEALTHCARE WORKERS THROUGH THE INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL PLATFORM IN MALAYSIAN PRIVATE HOSPITALS: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study to examine mental health problems of frontline healthcare workers and their impact on work performance through exploring the influence of digital platforms in Malaysian private hospitals. This research is essential in addressing previous knowledge and theoretical gaps on the antecedents that denote to mental health problems and how digital platforms are used to improve mental health wellbeing.

Basically, this study discusses the impact of four independent variables which are categorized as depression, anxiety, insomnia and distress factors whereas dependent variable is work performance. This study also will discuss problems concerning work performance of frontline healthcare workers (doctors, nurses, medical assistance, pharmacists and HR Management), specifically on poor service quality, turnover intention, work-related burnout, and exhaustion in Malaysian private hospitals. Hence, this study explores new solutions on the employees' work performance related issues to create awareness for the Malaysian private hospitals in improving mental health issues among front-line healthcare workers to enhance their work performance through the influence of digital platforms. Private hospitals in Malaysia are experiencing critical situations related to poor employees' performance which indirectly influence the overall productivity. Thus, private hospitals need to provide serious attention towards these related issues. A conceptual framework was formulated based on identified research gaps through the literature review.

It is expected that this study will enhance the awareness for the management in Malaysian private hospitals on dealing with mental health problems which impacts work performance by exploring digital platforms as a solution.

KEYWORDS

mental health, health care workers, work performance, digital platforms, private hospitals

INTRODUCTION

It is of utmost importance to recognize that issues pertaining to mental health should be studied as a state of well-being in which individuals are capable of assessing their abilities, coping with everyday life stressors, performing effectively, and contributing to their respective professions. [1]

Individuals exist on a spectrum ranging from good health to poor health, which can lead to illness or disability, thereby

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impacting their cognitive, emotional, and social capacities. Consequently, poor mental health has been associated with absenteeism, decreased productivity, increased costs, and diminished morale among employees [2]. According to the findings of the WHO [3], depression, anxiety disorders, and other conditions result in a loss of $1 trillion from the global economy annually due to decreased productivity. Healthcare professionals often grapple with mental health concerns, experiencing high rates of burnout and sick leave [4]. Additionally, on a global scale, nearly one-third of Americans (33%) report psychological distress [5]. This can be attributed to a combination of factors, including heightened obligations and responsibilities similar to other occupations, elevated levels of work-related stress, and various other factors [6]. Some researchers have stated that anxiety is prevalent among medical staff in Malaysia, accounting for 28.6%, followed by anxiety, accounting for 10.7%, and stress accounting for 7.9 % [7]. The survey findings indicated that frontline medical staff were more susceptible to psychological distress and mental health issues as a result of their involvement in specimen collection, diagnosis, treatment, and patient care during the epidemic. In Malaysia, medical practitioners reported an average depression level of 3.99 (standard deviation [SD]: 4.69), with the majority (69.0%) experiencing depression. Mild depression was reported by 13.7% of practitioners, while 7.2% were moderately depressed, 6.0% were very depressed, and 4.0% were extremely depressed [8]. Another study focusing on the mental health of nurses in Malaysia during the pandemic, conducted by [9, 10], revealed that over 70% of the 1,057 respondents in the nursing profession reported feeling stressed. Nurses reported both intermediate and high levels of stress, accounting for 88.7% and 7.2% respectively. The most prevalent symptoms of stress included fatigue, tense muscles, sore back and neck, eating disorders, and insomnia [11]. Healthcare providers face an increased risk of developing mental disorders due to their heightened vulnerability to COVID-19 [12]. Occupational factors such as employment status, shift work, and years of experience can further exacerbate anxiety and depression among healthcare workers. Shift work, in particular, has been associated with anxiety and depression due to the challenges of maintaining concentration during long working hours [13][14].

Previous studies have indicated that frontline healthcare workers encounter immediate psychological effects, including anxiety, distress, depression, and fear of transmitting infections to their loved ones, friends, and colleagues [15]. Furthermore, it has been observed that anxiety and stress can result in a decrease in sleep quality [16, 17], ultimately leading to a significant decline in the self-efficacy of medical staff. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the repercussions in order to prioritize the mental well-being of healthcare workers who may suffer from anxiety, depression, acute stress disorder, burnout, and PTSD. Research conducted during a global pandemic revealed a widespread prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress among healthcare workers both during and after the outbreak [18]. Moreover, these psychological symptoms can have long-term consequences, such as delayed emergency response and impaired attention and decision-making abilities during the ongoing pandemic [19]. Healthcare professionals often experience emotional exhaustion, burnout, helplessness, resentment, and overwhelm, all of which contribute to a decline in the quality of patient care [20, 21, 22]. Overall, the pandemic has resulted in reduced employee productivity and overwhelmed the healthcare sector. Some researchers have stated that extensive exposure to COVID-19 can lead to symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, which can ultimately impact employee performance [23].

Digital mental health platforms that prioritize evidence-based interventions have the potential to enhance the provision of mental health education for the entire workforce. These platforms can offer valuable skills such as teaching management, guided relaxation, and emotional regulation, without solely relying on qualified personnel. By operating on a large scale, digital solutions can provide therapeutic approaches and support positive behavioral change. They are accessible at any time and from any location, enabling timely assistance without the usual time constraints associated with individual therapy. Moreover, digital platforms are user-friendly and offer anonymity [24]. Despite the growing number of apps and websites, digital mental health interventions are not being fully utilized [25]. These interventions encompass various forms of contact with therapists, including messaging, phone calls, and video conferencing, as well as the delivery of therapy programs through computers, web, and mobile devices. They also include programs that utilize augmented or virtual reality, cognitive training on computers or the web, and peer and social support groups [26]. However, there is a lack of rigorous research on the effectiveness of digital interventions in promoting mental and emotional well-being, as well as their impact on other psychological and organizational outcomes [27].

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Despite the rapid advancement of research on digital health interventions in the clinical field the significance of preventive mental health solutions in the workplace is frequently disregarded [28]. Although workplaces have the potential to serve as ideal settings for preventive programs, most organizations prioritize reactive measures that address the symptoms of workplace stress. Previous workplace mobile health interventions have been primarily based on programs traditionally utilized in a clinical context, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. These interventions often involve a 'virtual coach' or counselor who guides users through the content. By following a digital pathway, employees have the autonomy to take charge of their own journey, completing the intervention at their own pace, focusing on content that is relevant to their personal situation, and selecting a time that suits them while maintaining anonymity [29 ; 30 ;31]. Overall, this creates an environment with ample opportunities and minimal demands, facilitating the desired behavioral change and resulting in enhanced psychological outcomes [32]. This not only benefits the individual but also the organization as a whole. Current researchers have a particular interest in the correlation between mental health and technology. Some researchers suggest that technology has the potential to greatly enhance employees' mental well-being [33]. Despite the promising health outcomes that technology adoption has yielded in various fields, its full potential in the healthcare sector has yet to be realized [34]. During challenging situations like epidemics and natural disasters, digital solutions have proven to be valuable in countries such as China, India, Singapore, and Australia [35] [36]. For instance, China utilized various internet platforms like WeChat and Tencent QQ to provide telemedicine and psychoeducation services during the COVID-19 pandemic [36]. Similarly, the Australian government has already implemented psychosocial support services for common mental health issues, self-harm, and suicide through text messages, online chat platforms, phone calls, video conferencing, online group chats, email, websites, and mobile apps [37] [38]. In the United States, mental health professionals and the general public utilize podcasts as an accessible and educational medium to share and disseminate information about mental health [39].

Only a limited number of studies conducted in Malaysia have focused on mental health concerns among healthcare providers. The objective of this study is to establish a framework for understanding mental health problems and work performance among health professionals in Malaysia by investigating the influence of digital platforms on enhancing mental health. Additionally, this research aims to shed light on the practical implications of utilizing digital platforms to improve the performance of frontline healthcare workers. Moreover, the study seeks to offer practical insights to practitioners (including frontline staff, hospital management, hospital managers, and middle managers) and policy makers who are interested in enhancing the performance of healthcare workers. In summary, the findings of this study are anticipated to serve as a valuable resource for departmental management in identifying factors that contribute to mental health issues, which directly impact work performance, and how digital platforms can support the mental well-being of healthcare workers. The research presented in this study offers a significant theoretical contribution. Scholars have become increasingly concerned about the impact of employees' mental health on organizations, and numerous studies have shown that mental health greatly influences both individual and organizational performance. However, previous research has primarily focused on the relationship between mental health and job performance in developed countries, neglecting the exploration of this relationship in emerging economies such as China. Therefore, the findings of this study are particularly valuable as they contribute to the existing literature on the role of healthcare employees' mental health in an emerging economy. Furthermore, this study provides valuable insights for future researchers, allowing them to delve deeper into mental health issues, work performance, and the utilization of digital platforms to effectively manage healthcare workers, including doctors, nurses, physician assistants, pharmacists, and HR managers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on previous research, it has been found that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of healthcare workers. The deteriorating mental health of individuals due to COVID-19 has resulted in a decline in the performance of frontline healthcare workers. In order to maintain competitiveness, organizations are now placing a strong emphasis on the mental well-being of their employees, as it is believed to contribute to exceptional work performance. There is evidence to suggest that digital tools can play a crucial role in enhancing mental health, making them a valuable resource for employers [40]. Regardless of the specific approach taken, utilizing digital devices to support

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employee mental health sends a clear message that self-care is important. It can also help reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness, encouraging employees to seek help before their mental health symptoms, such as depression and burnout, start to impact their job performance. The most effective support for healthcare workers involves recognizing the mental health challenges they face, implementing appropriate interventions to address the negative effects of the pandemic, and providing tailored healthcare plans through digital means. Given the uncertainty of the future, a conceptual framework has been developed to prioritize wellness efforts and serve as a foundation for addressing long-term mental health needs. This conceptual framework, depicted in Figure 1, is based on the work of Rajgopal [2], Lenzo et al. [18], and McMahon et al. [41].

FIGURE 1: DEALING WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND WORK PERFORMANCE AMONG FRONTLINE HEALTHCARE WORKERS THROUGH THE INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL PLATFORM.
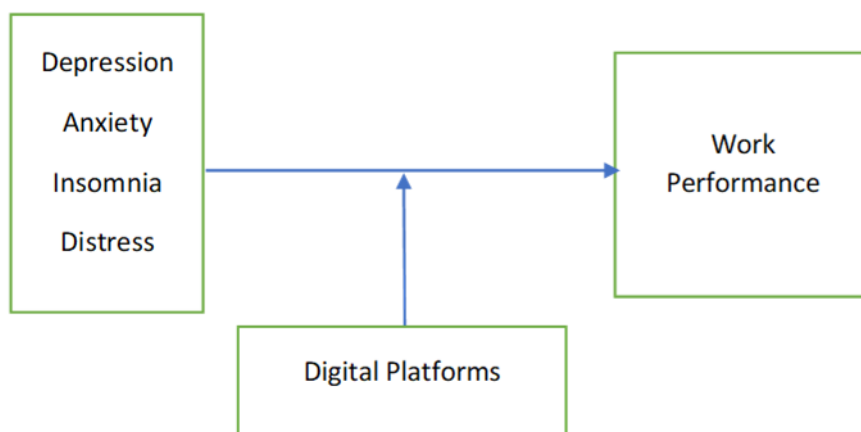
Adapted from [2], [18], & [41].

RESULT DISCUSSION

The result primarily discusses the negative impact on the mental health of employees in healthcare organizations. It highlights issues such as depressive symptoms, job dissatisfaction, burnout, anxiety, and distress. These factors not only affect the mental well-being of healthcare workers but also have implications for their physical health. The study specifically identifies burnout as a prevalent issue among doctors, along with job dissatisfaction. While most research focuses on patient health, it is crucial not to overlook the well-being of healthcare workers who operate in highly complex and stressful environments. The health of these workers also has an impact on the quality of life for both the general population and healthcare professionals. There existed initial yet strong scientific evidence regarding the efficacy of digital technologies in addressing mental health issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, including anxiety, stress, depression, and overall mental and emotional well-being. The findings of this review illustrate the potential of digital technologies in bridging the gap in mental healthcare during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, when the dissemination of disease-related news and implementation of quarantine measures have severely jeopardized public mental health. This study serves as a timely synthesis of current advancements and assessments, providing valuable insights for the future development of digital psychological interventions tailored to diverse populations and contexts.

RECOMMENDATION & LIMITATIONS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial for employees and healthcare workers to fulfill their responsibilities in protecting lives and maintaining the health of individuals. However, this unprecedented situation has resulted in widespread emotional distress. It is imperative to address this issue and prevent any long-term negative effects on the mental well-being of frontline healthcare staff as part of the overall response to the pandemic. To gain a better understanding of the mental health risks faced by healthcare employees, it is essential to identify the factors that impact their work performance. This will enable the development of methods and the provision of relevant support through a customized digital platform for healthcare professionals. Drawing from relevant literature,

we propose several measures to safeguard the mental health of healthcare workers in private hospitals in Malaysia. Firstly, the constant pressure to disseminate information to COVID-19 patients puts these employees at risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, and stress. Therefore, private hospitals must adhere to precautions and standard operating procedures when handling infected patients, ensuring that healthcare workers have access to adequate personal protective equipment to minimize such contact. Secondly, healthcare workers in settings where they lack awareness of the COVID-19 situation in their respective areas of residence should obtain accurate information from their hospital management and government through websites, blogs, and media outlets. Access to reliable information is crucial in keeping healthcare workers well-informed. Hospital administrators must prioritize the well-being of healthcare employees residing in areas heavily affected by COVID-19. This particular group, consisting of single/divorced individuals and those with a history of mental illness, is at a higher risk of experiencing depression and anxiety. To address this, it is crucial to implement mental health policies and provide ongoing counseling for these vulnerable individuals with significant personal backgrounds. In other countries, digital platforms have been successfully utilized to address mental health issues. However, there is limited research on the usage of digital platforms in the Malaysian healthcare industry, specifically. Therefore, it is important to consider implementing digital platforms to mitigate the impact of mental well-being issues among frontline healthcare workers. These platforms should provide easy access to online mental health consultation, counseling, or psychotherapy services for healthcare workers experiencing emotional disturbances due to the pandemic. By enabling healthcare professionals to communicate and share their emotions, challenges, and personalized solutions, digital communication platforms can serve as peer support networks, fostering resilience and camaraderie. It is worth noting that nurses, according to a study [15], tend to prefer emotion-focused coping strategies such as positive reframing, while seeking mental support from others is their least preferred technique. This highlights the significance of digital interventions as a valuable tool for emotional support. Ultimately, incorporating digital platforms into the healthcare system is an essential component of a comprehensive and community-driven response to the pandemic [26] [28].

In a post-pandemic world, it is crucial to maintain a balanced perspective on the role of digital interventions in mental health. The use of effective, hybrid, and responsive digital tools has the potential to greatly improve access to mental healthcare for healthcare workers. To enhance the evidence base for these interventions, it is essential to prioritize high-quality research and improve the funding environment for research projects. Even as the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, the psychological impact continues to persist. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure the continuous provision of online mental health services. Establishing support groups for medical staff in private hospitals can facilitate the sharing of personal and professional stress-related issues, ultimately enhancing the emotional support available to healthcare workers. Furthermore, further research is needed to explore other factors that influence mental health issues and impact the performance of frontline healthcare workers. These findings will provide reliable data for future policymaking and planning.

This study has identified several limitations. Firstly, there is a possibility of discrepancy between the different constructs found in the reviewed articles. This discrepancy arises from the varied application of conceptual elements, which is influenced by the nature of the research. However, we have minimized this possibility by carefully selecting the constructs through extensive readings. Secondly, the inclusion criteria may have restricted the number of relevant papers that were reviewed. The studies were chosen based on empirical research that had already been published, leading to the exclusion of 'grey literature' such as unpublished, non-peer-reviewed, and conference papers. Furthermore, some of the research was conducted early in the pandemic, so the mental health outcomes may still reflect pre-pandemic conditions. Moreover, this study did not consider translations and technical reports produced by mental health practitioners. Lastly, the inclusion criteria focused on literature related to the Covid-19 outbreak pandemic, which limited the number of studies on vulnerabilities after the pandemic. This limitation could have potentially resulted in different outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the global health system, placing a burden on healthcare systems worldwide. It is crucial and essential to prioritize the mental well-being and adaptability of healthcare workers. The proposed framework offers a valuable tool for understanding the complex relationship between mental health, digital platforms, and work performance. Furthermore, it can serve as a guide for future academic

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research in this area. Effectively managing the psychological effects of the pandemic requires a long-term commitment to supporting the mental health of healthcare workers at personal, organizational, and societal levels. By integrating these mental health solutions into the new normal, we can take the first step in recognizing their benefits and addressing other global public health challenges in addition to combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

This article explores recent advancements in various technological solutions aimed at addressing mental health issues. Digital platforms have the potential to disperse and enhance evidence-based psychotherapy. However, despite the progress made by digital platforms, there are still several constraints that hinder their application and adoption. Technological advancements are actively seeking to overcome mental health challenges by utilizing optimized and cutting-edge digital solutions through rigorous medicine and digital interventions. The COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasized the importance of health on digital platforms, but there is a lack of research in Malaysia, particularly in the field of health. Therefore, extensive research and policy support are necessary to implement digital platforms in the nursing field. Future research should focus on examining blended care models using scientific methods. It is inevitable that the future of mental health will incorporate digital solutions, which, if implemented correctly, can contribute to improving social well-being. Digital mental health interventions can serve as a compelling alternative to address the current challenges and barriers faced by healthcare professionals in seeking support for mental well-being in the post-pandemic era. Future research should also investigate user engagement and retention rates among frontline healthcare workers to determine the long-term effects of the intervention and its appropriate implementation.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST & ETHICS COMMITTEE:
None.

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