Leaders' Strategies for Managing Difficult Emotions During Peak Waves of COVID-19 Pandemic: A Study on Senior Managers of Textile Industry in Pakistan

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Abstract: *The study focuses on difficult emotions experienced by the functional heads of two leading textile companies in Pakistan during the peak waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. It explicates the coping strategies developed at individual and group levels and provides a unique indigenous narrative of how leaders manage their emotional journey during the pandemic. The research design was qualitative, and in-depth semi-structured interviews were the primary method for data collection. The findings highlighted that the participants experienced fear, anxiety, loneliness, and frustration due to the COVID-19 pandemic and it also unveiled the measures adopted at organizational and national levels to manage and contain the viral spread. Furthermore, managers who accepted their own and their teammates' emotions were able to develop effective coping strategies to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The study contributes towards understanding human emotions in the workplace and how organizational leadership inculcates different coping strategies to process these emotions.*

Key Words: COVID-19 Pandemic, Crisis Leadership, Emotions, Fear, Sensemaking, Textile Sector, Workplace

Introduction

The changing work environments, uncertainty and fluctuating markets resulting from COVID-19 and the lockdown have created increasing organizational challenges (Khambule, 2020). Organizations across the world have undergone profound changes to cope with this pandemic. The uncertainty of this crisis has further proved disastrous for a business's sustainability, rendering it "a global health and economic crisis" (Caringal-Go, Teng-Calleja, Franco, Manaois, & Zantua, 2021; McGuire, Cunningham, Reynolds, & Matthews-Smith, 2020). A report by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations mentions that the global economy has lost around $8.5 trillion since COVID-19. It further stated that the GDP growth in developed countries plunged to -5% in 2020 (United Nations, 2020). In Pakistan, the covid-19 had a negative socio-economic impact. According to Pakistan Economic Survey 2020-21, Pakistan's stock market bore a loss of an average of 1500 points daily in the initial lockdown period. Numerous Pakistani industries fared poorly in the previous two devastating waves of COVID-19.

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95% of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) reported that their operations were curtailed, and 46% of surveyed businesses laid off some employees. On the contrary, the sales and profits of some leading businesses were boosted during the pandemic.

At the beginning of 2020, when COVID-19 was at its peak, European and American buyers instructed Pakistan to "stop all the shipments and further production" (Dawn, 2020). This global shutdown impacted the domestic supply chain and apparel and home textile exporters. Due to repeated layoffs and lockdowns (which result in supply-side and demand-side interruptions), the demand for Made in Pakistan products has been progressively dropping in foreign countries. According to trade union officials, more than a million textile workers in Pakistan lost their jobs due to the coronavirus outbreak (Naqvi, 2020).

The emotional experiences of individuals play a crucial role in crises and are decisive in determining the success of any organization (Lu & Huang, 2018). Emotions play a significant role in regulating the actions and decisions of leaders. An emphasis on studying emotions in crisis is made by several scholars (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Pfau & Wan, 2006; Turner, 2007). Negative emotions are mainly at play in crisis events. It is essential not to let such negative emotions hinder the productivity of work, so emotionally intelligent leadership is vital. Madera and Smith (2009) contend that leaders' negative emotional experiences govern the overall evaluation of leaders in crises. They specifically stressed the role of anger, grief, danger, and unrest.

As a result of the ongoing outbreak, there were many difficulties at work because of the widespread fear of possible contamination. Even if an employee was not exposed to the disease, they still felt concerned, uncertain and tired due to the seeming threat of harm to themselves or their family. In addition, knowing a possible illness might affect a person's daily activities and negatively impact their work quality (Sarwar et al., 2022).

Crises test leaders, and their success or failure depends on how they make sense of the events (Colville & Murphy, 2006). It is evident from prior research that emotions energise sensemaking, thus contributing significantly to the sensemaking process (Schmidt & Weiner, 1988; Weiner, 1980). Weick (1995) asserts that unprecedented and confusing events prompt the autonomic nervous system, which stimulates the sensemaking process. Researchers have highlighted that the autonomic nervous system and emotional experiences are linked (George & Jones, 2001). People focus more on adverse events than positive ones (Labianca & Brass, 2006). Individuals look for environmental cues and hold their negative feelings and emotions from those cues, thus engaging in sensemaking (Schwarz & Clore, 2007). Moreover, it is argued that intense emotions are more likely to involve individuals in sensemaking than less intense ones (Beal, Weiss, Barros, & MacDermid, 2005).

Since many businesses suffered a lot due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this study contributes theoretically to the crisis leadership literature by exploring the factors that helped leaders process their emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this study explores how leaders made sense of the pandemic and its repercussions. Minimal studies have been done in this area, with no specific study conducted in Pakistan. To explain and explore this concept, the study addresses the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. What kinds of emotions were experienced by the leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did leaders cope with different emotions arising from uncertainty posed by the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How emotionally intelligent were the leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. How did leaders make sense of their emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Industrial Context

The organizations selected for this study are leading textiles of Pakistan - Nishat Mills and Sapphire Textiles. The Sapphire Group of Companies began with Sapphire Textiles and has now expanded into the dairy and power generation industries. Sapphire Textile Mills Limited was established in 1969 as a public limited company in Pakistan, and the Karachi Stock Exchange lists its shares. The company's manufacturing facilities, which comprise 139,433 spindles, 3,120 rotors, 360 looms, and 215

stitching machines, are situated in Sindh and Punjab. It is a well-known textile company in Pakistan with more than 16,000 employees and one of the top exporters in the sector. It produces cotton fabric, yarn, and clothing. It exports its manufactured goods to more than 35 countries worldwide. For the year ending in June 2020, Sapphire Textile Mills, which is Sapphire retail's holding/parent business, reported a combined profit after tax of Rs.7,864 million in contrast to Rs 5,039 million in 2019. Similarly, the business's net revenue was close to Rs. 53 billion, up from Rs. 49.6 billion in 2019, a 6.9 per cent increase in a revenue-declining year for most companies.

A leading business conglomerate in Pakistan, the Nishat Group of Companies operates in all key industries, including textile, banking, insurance, hotel, power generation, dairy, and paper products. The Nishat Group's flagship business is Nishat Textile Mills, with more than 12,000 employees. It started its operations in 1951. It is one of Pakistan's biggest and most advanced vertically integrated textile firms. The business also operates some of the most cutting-edge textile dyeing and processing facilities, two garment stitching facilities, two home textile stitching facilities, and 120 MW power generation facilities. Sales of Nishat Mills were dominated by exports last year, and garments remained the key revenue contributor in the fiscal year 2021. According to Pakistan Credit Rating Agency, Limited (PACRA), the company's revenue decreased by 4% by June 2020. However, the company was still able to cross the mark of Rs. 60.904 billion in its topline, which was the second highest during the last five years. Despite lockdown and business disruptions caused by COVID-19, the two leading groups continued to increase their revenues.

Literature Review

Appraisal theory proposes that emotions are connected to an individual's assessment and judgment of the events rather than the events themselves (Lazarus, 1991). Affective events theory adds to this by suggesting that depending on how significant an event is to one's personal aspirations, a sensemaking trigger will have a different emotional impact (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013). Thus, emotional experiences trigger sensemaking, and individuals look to

unforeseen and unexpected events like COVID-19 to make sense of their emotions.

People often confuse emotions, feelings, affect, and mood and use these terms interchangeably when there is a difference. Emotions are momentary and more intense than moods (Fisher, 2000, 2002; Gohm & Clore, 2002). Cognitive Appraisal Theorists define *emotion* as a structured psychological reaction to an event or entity (Izard, 1991; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). George (1996) suggests that emotions are intense feelings aimed at someone or something. In their study on emotions, Mulligan and Scherer (2012) gave a comprehensive definition. They said that x can be regarded as an emotion only if it is related to feelings and attitudes, is directed towards something or someone, involves physiological changes and at least one appraisal serves as the catalyst and guide for it. Emotions are short-lived, intense responses to an event or a person (Beal et al., 2005; Fisher & Noble, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sternberg, 2000). Emotions are expressed and labeled in multiple ways (Ekman, 1997).

Previous studies have demonstrated that employee mental health is negatively impacted by the fear of contracting a communicable disease (Fiksenbaum et al., 2007; Kelloway et al., 2012). Research by Sarwar et al. (2022) showed that this kind of fear affects employees' death salience and heightens their sense of threat to their own and their loved ones' well-being.

A crisis can be distinguished from other organizational challenges owing to its ambiguous and grave nature (James, Wooten, & Dushek, 2011). Bavik, Shao, Newman, and Schwarz (2021) delineate that the first attribute that differentiates a crisis from other organizational challenges is its unforeseen character. Another distinguishing factor between crisis events and other organizational challenges is salience. Salience is the sense of importance and urgency associated with an impact (Bavik et al., 2021). This perceived significance and urgency create precariousness and time constraints thus having a detrimental impact on the decision-making ability of a leader.

Crises also bring positive organizational change by creating new opportunities (James et al., 2011). For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic

has decreased customer demands and plummeted sales and revenues. However, simultaneously, it has changed the needs of the consumers and presented opportunities to cater to these emerging needs in the business and job market (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020). Hence, a crisis can be far more challenging than any other organizational event since it necessitates the leaders to hone their skills in mitigating the possible disruptions and, at the same time, cash in on the new opportunities.

James and Wooten (2005) noted that the leadership demonstrated throughout the process is what sets apart businesses that survive crises from those that don't. Crisis leadership is the process through which leaders take proactive measures to prepare for crises, manage their immediate effects, and learn from the traumatic experience of crises (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017; Firestone, 2020).

Sensemaking is the process of social construction that occurs when people come across implausible events like a crisis (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1988). Simply put, individuals make sense or logic out of the ambiguous and unforeseen situations they face. Weick (1995) noted, "Sensemaking is about how people generate what they interpret."

Leaders are imperative for sensemaking in crisis (Boin & Renaud, 2013; Sobral, Carvalho, Łagowska, Furtado, & Grobman, 2020). Employees look up to their leaders in crises to make sense of events for them. Moreover, leaders are inundated with a lot of contradictory data linked to indistinct events and resulting problems, thus making it crucial for leaders to make sense of the crisis and to relay the meanings they develop to others, i.e., the role of sense-giving (Foldy, Goldman, & Ospina, 2008).

Leaders face two main issues while confronting crises and making sense of them: ambiguity and uncertainty (Walsh, 1995). As leaders do not know what is happening, uncertain aspects can result in no explanation of the situation, whereas ambiguous aspects are prone to multiple interpretations. When leaders rely too much on case-based prior knowledge or experience, they are more likely to make errors, and these errors, in turn, can restrict the creative thinking of leaders needed to solve the problems (Combe & Carrington, 2015).

Various studies highlighted that emotions could be understood in terms of a hierarchy, including both negative emotions, such as anger, sadness, and fear, and positive emotions, such as love and joy, divided further into categories and subcategories (Dillard & Shen, 2007; N. Frijda & Fischer, 2003). The significance of emotional experiences lies in their impact on workplace attitudes and behaviours (Ashton-James & Ashkanasy, 2005). However, negative emotions are commonly experienced and observed during a crisis (Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000).

Individuals who can better comprehend the feelings of themselves and others are generally high in Emotional Intelligence (EI), i.e., more emotionally aware. They understand the possible influence of others' emotions on themselves and successfully maintain their relationships by handling them. Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, and Gupta (2010) revealed in their review that leaders' emotional standpoint affects the employees. Leaders who often display negative emotions give room to a hostile environment. Consequently, the morale of employees decreases, which causes poor performance.

EI and leadership have a strong connection between them. These two constructs are often linked together (Badea & Pană, 2010; Dulewicz & Higgs, 2003; Henry, 2011; Hong, Catano, & Liao, 2011; Upadhyay, 2021). EI plays a significant role in a leader's capacity to manage employee relations (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016). Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2013) point out that a good leader must possess EI apart from an intelligence quotient (IQ). Emotional Intelligence dominates the competencies required for successful crisis leadership because an emotionally intelligent leader utilises his/her understanding of emotions to tame the difficulties faced, thus imparting a sense of trust and cooperation to their employees (Yusof et al., 2014; Abraham, 2000; Miller, 1999).

Strong leadership is critical to fighting this pandemic. The researchers accentuate adaptability, empathy and flexibility as important crisis leadership qualities (Brownlee, 2020; Liang, 2021). This view was further endorsed by Dirani et al. (2020) in their research, which emphasized process leadership, i.e., "leadership is a process that has to do with the relationship between leader and their followers." They also contended that in addition to being emotionally aware, leaders must be socially aware, too, i.e., they must

communicate with their followers regularly. It refines the decision-making capacity, motivates team members, and enhances the commitment to the firm (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). We developed the following conceptual framework for the study, which highlights the relationship of important variables of the study:
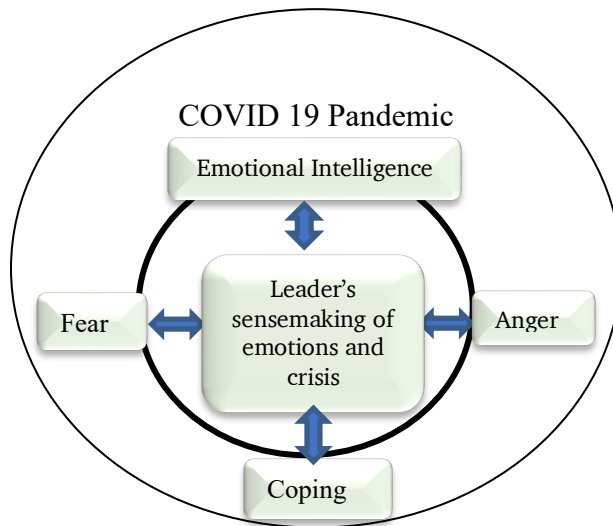

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Methods

This basic qualitative research study focuses on senior managers' experiences with two leading textile companies in Pakistan. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and selection criteria were based on their work experience and official title (functional heads) in the organisations. After the consent of participants, semi-structured interviews of functional heads were conducted. Mason (2010) suggests that a large sample size for a qualitative study is unnecessary and impractical. 11 functional heads were working in a textile unit of each organization, and five participants from each organization were selected based on the criteria mentioned above. The profile of the participants is described in Table 1.

Table 1.

Profile of Participants

Organisation	Respondents	Age	Gender	Experience (in total) (in years)	Experience (in the current organisation) (in years)	Designation
Sapphire	R1	32	Male	7	2	Head of Finance
Sapphire	R2	29	Female	4	3	Head of HR
Sapphire	R3	35	Male	10	4	Head of Marketing
Sapphire	R4	34	Female	8	4	Head of Design
Sapphire	R5	30	Male	5	4	Head of IT
Nishat	R6	30	Female	9	5	Head of Design
Nishat	R7	40	Female	15	5	Head of Finance
Nishat	R8	42	Male	17	6	Head of Manufacturing

Organization	Respondents	Age	Gender	Experience (in total) (in years)	Experience (in the current organisation) (in years)	Designation
Nishat	R9	28	Female	4	2	Head of IT
Nishat	R10	30	Male	5	2	Head of HR

Four of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the rest were conducted online through zoom since some participants were cautious about having face-to-face interactions due to COVID SOPs. After each interview, the researchers immediately transcribed it on Microsoft Word. The respondents were given specific codes to protect their anonymity and were labeled R1, R2, and R10. After transcribing each interview in word files, the authors familiarised themselves with the data by reading it multiple times and taking notes for meaningful patterns. They then coded each line of individual interview transcripts with paper and pencil. The initial codes list was shifted to an excel worksheet and merged the codes into categories and themes. These themes were arranged under each research question.

Thematic data analysis was adopted to analyze the data collected. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is "identifying and reporting themes within data". After generating codes, the researchers combined the codes into broader themes. At this stage, some codes were grouped into themes and sub-themes while others were rejected. First, the researchers identified the themes by re-reading the codes multiple times and looking for similarities. Then, they highlighted similar codes in the same colour to differentiate between the themes. Later, the researchers copied these themes and codes with the excerpts into the excel sheets, which were separated based on research questions.

In the next phase, the themes were re-examined, and some themes were discarded while others were retained. Moreover, the researchers also looked for themes that could be merged. The themes need to be distinct from each other. In this study, the researchers reviewed themes and kept the themes that contributed in some meaningful way. The researchers also ensured that the direct quotes were related to the research questions and the relevant themes. Themes were refined at this stage. During the refinement, the researchers looked at whether the themes contained sub-themes. First, the researchers developed the main themes and the sub-themes. Later, they described the meaning of each theme to corroborate the findings identified in each theme.

In the final stage of the thematic analysis, the report was written to narrate the data meaningfully. It also included providing enough evidence in the report by quoting the excerpts from data that captured the gist of the described theme. Researchers included the study's excerpts and narrative analysis to make a strong argument. In addition, the tables from excel sheets were incorporated into this study, comprising themes, sub-themes and related quotes.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented and discussed in this section while addressing the research questions:

RQ1: What kinds of emotions were experienced by the leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Participants experienced multiple negative emotions during COVID-19. The primary negative emotions were frustration, fear, sadness, and anxiety. Many participants felt frustrated as they had to stay home for months due to the lockdown and struggled to finish their work. Few participants were on anti-depressant due to their mounting anxiety of social isolation. A participant said, "*I woke up early and worked the whole day on my laptop. Everything was slow…so I went into depression twice…I was mentally disturbed.*" The majority of the participants felt scared by the thought of losing their loved ones to COVID-19. They were fearful of getting infected by COVID-19. They witnessed people in their surroundings who succumbed to COVID-19, which made them fearful. One of the respondents mentioned, "*My mother's aunt died from COVID…I was fearful more than ever.*" Likewise, another participant mentioned, "*I was mostly worried about my aged parents and sent them to our native home…there*

were hundreds and thousands of cases. It was a scary moment for us." Another participant said, "*I also caught a cough at that time…I was doubtful if I had contracted the virus…I was afraid that if I went home, they [family members] might also catch it from me.*" (R10). The underlying fear of death and the fear of death of loved ones are depicted in the statements of participants. A participant said, "*I have seen the death of a friend from COVID, and that was horrible for me…the fear increased too much after his death.*" *(R7)*. The overall environment of fear of getting an infection was evident, as a participant said, "*When we got infected, the fear became more real. A constant sadness was on everyone's faces and voices.*"

Fear negatively affected a person's performance, and many participants experienced anger, exhaustion, and burnout. A participant said, "*These emotions affected me initially…my stress level was high, so my performance got, I would say, a little affected as well. My communication skills got a little affected.*" Likewise, R9 mentioned that in the beginning, her attitude was harsh, and she blamed the negligence of the infected person as the sole cause of her getting infected. Later, as they understood that this virus was actual, so they accepted the situation. A participant said, " *The situation was scary because the new cases were coming up every other day, but gradually like I accepted the reality.*" However, the fear lingered in many participants' minds during official meetings. Therefore, many tried to focus on business matters and avoid personal exchanges. A participant said, "*Every Friday, we had an online meeting…I did not feel like talking to anyone. So the link with the team became weak.*"

The first disruptive practice of COVID-19 associated with negative emotions was stress due to staying locked at home, inability to go out and meet friends, etc. R1 expressed, "*it was a challenging experience to stay at home…that was a very testing time.*" Participants recalled emotions triggered by staying isolated and detached from others and by only being able to use virtual modes for interaction. R6 stated, "*Before the pandemic, I used to go out a lot…after this whole lockdown thing, social distancing thing, we had to stay in our home for like many months, and we used to do…everything online…so yes, it got very frustrating and annoying.*" The lockdown and pandemic violated the participant's urge to meet people and socialize.

The primary emotions experienced by participants due to alienation were anger and sadness; the associated secondary emotions experienced were frustration, annoyance, depression, and loneliness. In addition, some respondents got infected by COVID-19 and feared they might not carry it to their homes. For example, R10 replied, "*I also caught a cough at that time… So I was doubtful if I had contracted the virus…I was afraid that if I went home, they [family members] might also catch it from me.*" Thus, it can be seen that participants were scared, afraid, and anxious because of getting exposed to the pandemic.

A few participants were concerned about their job security and financial stability at the beginning of COVID-19 because everything was shut down and production was halted. At the start of COVID-19, they faced salary deductions that spurred emotions. A few participants also felt sad for their colleagues because they were terminated, which made it challenging to channel their negative emotions, "*There was a layoff in our company. It was sad and stressful.*"

The underlying dominant emotion experienced by the participants is fear, which manifests in other emotions like frustration, annoyance, anxiety, and anger. The participants also felt a sense of loneliness leading to sadness due to isolation. They were connected only via online channels, which made them sad. Various researchers pose that sadness and anger, especially in female participants, negatively impact leader-follower relations (Brescoll, 2016; Brescoll, Okimoto, & Vial, 2018; Fischbach, Lichtenthaler, & Horstmann, 2015).

Most participants disclosed that they were scared and worried about their loved ones getting infected with COVID-19. Multiple recent studies have shown that fear of infection is the primary stressor significantly linked to depressive symptoms and has a detrimental impact on the psychological state of individuals (Nabe-Nielsen et al., 2021). Moreover, most people worry about their loved ones getting infected (Spatafora et al., 2022), which was also the case in the current study. Extreme levels of fear have been seen as the prominent causative factor of suicide incidents in COVID-19 (Dsouza, Quadros, Hyderabadwala, & Mamun, 2020). Contrarily, fear can be helpful, too, as a recent study showed that fear of infection

significantly dissuaded people from violating COVID-19 SOPs (Balbuena & Monaro, 2021).

In the current study, few participants mentioned feeling a sense of relaxation and happiness due to the lockdown. Geisler (2020) stated that relaxed and calm participants positively influence employee productivity. Working from home gave the participants in this study a chance to resume their hobbies, discover their hidden talents, and spend more time with their families. These results align with the findings of Forte et al. (2021) that individuals discovered new interests and hobbies during the lockdown period, eliciting positive emotions.

Participants from both organizations went through fear, sadness, frustration, annoyance, and anxiety, and the results were consistent with what Tiedens et al. (2000) said "people in crises commonly experience negative emotions. Hence, it is crucial to adopt an effective emotion management strategy to cope with these negative emotions" (p. 560-575).

RQ2: How did leaders cope with different emotions arising from uncertainty posed by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Coping Strategies at the Individual level

The participants believed the daily updates of surging COVID-19 cases would make them more harmful. Some participants asserted that they kept busy with their office work and house chores, used to watch online seasons, and played online games to avoid thinking about the prevailing situation. A participant said, "*I kept myself busy and worked overtime. So this thing impacted my health too.*" (R4)

Many participants kept themselves busy with family activities and engaged in some sports. Some comments were, "*I managed my time with my kids along with working from home.*" (R3). The fear of the unknown resided in the psyche of participants; therefore, they tried to distract their attention from the immediate threat of getting infected. Some participants ignored the threat and engaged in outdoor activities with their friends. They started taking precautions after getting infected by the virus and seeing the deaths of immediate family members due to COVID-19. A participant said, "*the first time when we got it [COVID], we became so much paranoid that when*

we were going to Emporium, liberty or any crowded place, we used to wear double masks so that we do not get it again. After that, we used to follow all precautions.*"

Many participants from organization # 2 got into praying to cope with the stress. A participant said, "*I used to pray as much as possible to connect with Allah, making me feel positive and reducing my anxiety.*" R7 further illustrates this: "*…prayed to Allah for me, my family, and extended family members.*" Many participants said that taking preventive measures would reduce our fear of getting an infection. A participant said, "*I strictly followed the precautionary measures. I used to keep hand sanitizer with me and wear a mask. I maintained a proper distance, etc.*"

Few respondents said they had to stay available 24/7 to avoid technical glitches. However, it was new for everyone to work from home to familiarise them with tech tools and make data accessible; they had to stay responsive all the time, which triggered emotions in them. Talking about this, R6 said, "*I used to feel very stressed since I had to stay available no matter the time is…I had to stay responsive.*" Likewise, R9 commented, "*I was annoyed…there were no timings to be followed…this was the biggest impact…we had to be available to our bosses 24/7.*"

Many respondents from both organizations underlined the significance of flexibility and adaptability. For example, R5 said, "*…so we should be flexible and ready for all situations.*" Another participant said, "*We must be flexible rather than rigid*". Respondents stressed the importance of IT tools as they help employees to work from home. R2 remarked, "*The biggest lesson is that we, the participants, need to grow up...we are still stuck on the paperwork… 'I will not spend money on technology,' so this mentality needs to be changed.*" R2 further iterated, "*new tools are coming…we need to stretch our boundaries…several tools are available which we are not utilizing.*" Participants highlighted that training on new technology is essential for effective implementation. R6 remarked, "*…[team members] should be given proper training of any tech tool like Zoom, Skype, Slack…so they can work from anywhere.*"

Coping Strategies at Group Level

Some participants from organization # 1 expressed that they supported their subordinates by extending emotional and moral support. For example, R2 described: "*If someone was ill, we sent him/her flowers because we could not meet, or we also sent him/her some healthy snacks. Then, when he/she returned to the office after recovering, we welcomed him/her warmly; I think these things are more important than the actual medication.*"Another factor that depicts the presence of emotional Intelligence in participants is their teamwork and collaboration. They tried to communicate politely and moved forward together with their teams.

The participants from both organizations were well aware of the emotions of their team members and subordinates and extended support to them. In addition, elements of compassion and empathy were the most observed in the participants from both organizations. Shaffer (2020) and Amendolair (2003) stressed the importance of social awareness in participants by stating that such participants are more prepared to find out the best in team members and utilise it for building a collaborative team leading to effective conflict resolution.

The participants sought social support to cope with negative emotions. The participants said they looked to their family and friends for emotional and physical support thus reducing depression and anxiety levels. Studies conducted earlier also support the findings of this study by asserting that social support helped healthcare workers, youth, and participants cope with their emotions (Labrague, 2021; Ozdemir & Tas Arslan, 2018; Schäfer et al., 2017).

When the participants experienced the events such as deaths in their surroundings or getting infected once, which elicited emotions, they tried to decrease the likelihood of that situation by being extra careful and taking preventive measures. Birknerová and Nicole Čigarská (2021) suggested using prevention to decrease negative emotions. Furthermore, a research study maintained that being more able to follow protective measures reduced fear in individuals (Probst, Humer, Stippl, & Pieh, 2020). However, there is a lack of research regarding protective measures for the COVID-19 pandemic and its

relationship with reducing the fear of getting infected.

Furthermore, some participants allowed themselves to experience the emotions entirely and relied on their religious beliefs to minimize the impact of emotions on them. Prior research in this field shows a positive relationship between religious coping and managing stress levels (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Algahtani et al., 2021).

Many female participants kept themselves busy with office chores to avoid negative emotions and news, which may evoke Fear of COVID-19. These results are in harmony with the findings of Brescoll (2016), which showed that female participants preferred avoidance coping strategies to manage their emotions. Nonetheless, research by Werner and Gross (2010) suggests that avoiding the situation can reduce stress and associated negative emotions in the short run while being harmful in the long run.

RQ3: How emotionally intelligent were the leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The findings of this study indicate that leaders were socially aware and high in relationship management, i.e., they understood the emotions of their team members and maintained effective communication with them throughout the lockdown.

Additionally, leaders understood their own emotions, but only some found it challenging to manage them at the start of COVID-19. The findings of this study also shed light on how the leaders made sense of their emotions. Leaders extracted information from the environment and made possible sense of their emotions. On the other hand, the leaders experienced negative emotions due to Alienation, risk of getting infected, salary deductions, no work-life balance, and positive emotions from getting months off from office after a long period. Finally, the findings of this study highlighted the leadership lessons learned from COVID-19. Participants asserted that leaders must be flexible, adaptable, resilient, and tech-savvy to lead through the crisis effectively and successfully. In addition, they must keep their employees motivated and engaged.

The participants believed that everyone in COVID-19 was facing a tough time and that understanding the employees' emotions and managing their emotions were imperative for motivating employees. The organization's

participants talked about empathetic listening, compassion, and mental stability. R1 said, "*Participants not only impact themselves, but an entire organisation…[participants] need to be open and empathetic in their approach*". Similarly,

Self-awareness and Self-management play a vital role in understanding one's own emotions accurately and give a sense of confidence and positivity. Participants who identify their emotions accurately and manage them bring positive change to their team members during crises. Emphasizing these two dimensions, R1 said, "*Participants…need to be mentally and emotionally stable… and that was COVID all about.*" R7 believed "*…[participants] need to give positive vibes to each employee.*" Another participant highlighted the power of words, "*Communicating without harsh words is also a key factor.*"

Another research query was to see the role of Emotional Intelligence in leaders dealing with negative emotions. The results of this study supported the earlier research, which provided ample evidence that emotionally intelligent participants have a high success ratio and induce trust and enthusiasm in their employees (Abraham, 2000; Ciarrochi et al. (2002); George, 2000).

The participants from the first organization in this study were good at managing their emotions, i.e., they had a high level of self-management compared to participants from the second organization. This difference was not due to any variation in an organizational setting as both organizations were from the textile sector; a case-by-case analysis of the data shows that the individuals' personalities accounted for this difference. Most participants from the second organization faced the issue of self-management, especially females. Participants who were more severely impacted by this pandemic faced more difficulty managing their emotions. For example, extrovert participants had to stay at home in lockdown.

Participants who were low in self-management faced the challenge of deteriorating work relationships initially, and their performance got affected (see Amendolair, 2003). Research suggests that emotional Intelligence is indispensable for participants in crisis as it helps participants stay emotionally stable and earn employees' trust (Abdel-Fattah,

2020; Alonazi, 2020; Mackinnon, Bacon, Cortellessa, & Cesta, 2013; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2022). Therefore, the participants in this study also stressed the importance of being emotionally intelligent during COVID-19.

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RQ4: How did leaders make sense of their emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic?

At the beginning of COVID-19, participants needed more helpful information on what COVID was. There was high uncertainty. They were concerned about their job, meaning their identity influenced them as an employee of an organization rather than a leader. Simultaneously, their team members and subordinates were afraid, too, so they were faced with the additional task of eliminating the fears of their subordinates. The participant's identity was changing as they had to make changes in response to the pandemic. The organization and the employees' roles were redefined as the magnitude of the work changed with a crisis.

Drastic changes or upheavals in the organisation cause individuals to talk and act about the organization in a different way than before (Karp & Helgø, 2009). An example was a leader's response about the organisation as a "virtual family." This description revealed that the leader redefined the organization by relating it to a new style and medium of work. This means that online has become the new norm in lockdowns and pandemics. The term family here also denotes that participants were concerned with employee engagement and stayed connected to the employees more than before to allay their emotions.

Christianson and Barton (2021) argue that "people act their way into knowing," but this was challenging in COVID-19 peak waves and lockdown because people were restricted to their homes. Action helps people identify and generate cues. This pandemic disrupted how people take action. The opportunities to talk and interact were

fewer, which made them stressed. In the present study, the participants faced negative emotions due to isolation and Alienation. Virtual tools and social media did not give them that sense of satisfaction they got by physically meeting and talking with people.

The actions the participants took in the peak waves of COVID-19 and lockdown were enactments of their developing comprehension of how work was to be done. Participants mentioned that this was a sudden change, and they had to shift the active mode to work from home, which they had not done before. Participants' roles changed from just a leader to a coach. The organizations and the participants had to consider how to function while working from home and with limited workspace access and human resources in case employees got infected. This spurred emotions in them.

People tend to notice and focus on negative cues more than positive ones (Fila, 2022). This was the case in the present study as well. Participants extracted cues and described multiple narratives of what they went through in the peak waves of the pandemic, which helped them make sense of their emotions. The participants noticed they were filled with negative emotions due to being confined in one place, working round the clock, and being concerned about what if they get infected. In addition, they were noticing the infected cases and deaths in their surroundings and were trying to draw interpretations from them.

Since the pandemic was novel and unprecedented, the information available to participants needed to be complete. The theory of sensemaking by Weick (1988) suggests that plausibility rather than accuracy drives the construction of sensemaking into sensible accounts in such times. In the current study, most participants avoided the situation to reduce anxiety. They created plausible accounts (false narratives) to distance themselves from emotions instead of considering reality. It is evident that participants faced the desire to connect and interact, and their longing to connect might have resulted in narrow narratives "shaped by the desire to ally social movement." These results align with the findings (Procentese, Gatti, & Ceglie, 2021).

For a few respondents, the events they narrated were positive and memorable in retrospect. Nevertheless, instead, they focused on the positive cues in their surroundings when they described that lockdown provided them a period to relax.

RQ5: What were the leadership lessons derived from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Respondents opined that in any crisis, the manager's primary concern is to keep their team members motivated. Regarding the contribution of work autonomy to employee motivation, R5 said, "*I believe the liberty to make and implement quick decisions is very important in a crisis.*" R3 also shared similar views stating, "*Seeing how they [team members] worked in this crisis when a certain sense of freedom was given to them, I think we should trust them.*"

R10 underscored the significance of employee recognition in crises to keep them motivated. R10 replied, "*We appreciate employees who work more, but in crises, you must appreciate those who managed to work less, and you must forego their mistakes.*" R6 mentioned, "*…so participants should organize some camps and activities to keep their employees mentally peaceful.*" Likewise, R4 said, "*…if you want to keep your employees motivated and if you want to become a good leader, then you have to be in employee engagement.*"

Participants must ensure they are available for their employees, especially in crises. This way, they can better understand their team members and their concerns. In this context, R2 said, "*…all employees used to come to the office so that people could be eased out.*" R7 from organization two also stated, "*…so a leader is the one who does not increase the communication gap and stay involved with his team like he was before the crisis.*"

Participants indicated that an organization must be technologically advanced to cope with the crisis. Participants expressed dismay that organizations still need to catch up in digitization. These results support the findings of Härting, Rösch, Serafino, Häfner, and Bueechl (2022) and Vasudevan (2021) that COVID-19 has accelerated the process of digitisation and the IT models need to be carried on after the COVID-19 as well.

Work autonomy refers to a sense of freedom and independence in performing tasks (Wall, Jackson, & Davids, 1992; Wall, Jackson, & Mullarkey, 1995). Work autonomy favours the employee's well-being (Bauer, 2004; Knudsen,

Busck, & Lind, 2011) and performance and creativity levels (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Research conducted by Spagnoli and Molinaro (2020) shows that the relationship between emotional exhaustion and negative emotions was moderated by work autonomy during COVID-19. High work autonomy led to low negative emotions in employees. The current study also suggested that work autonomy is essential for employee motivation, especially in crises.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The participants experienced positive and negative emotions; however, the intensity of negative emotions was high. The findings suggest that managers used adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms to manage their emotions. For example, female leaders predominantly avoided the situation to escape negative thoughts. Other coping mechanisms employed by the leaders were preventive, religious, and social support. The study highlighted the context under which these emotions were felt and corresponding coping strategies developed by the senior managers of leading textiles in Pakistan. An exciting finding is that acceptance and recognition of emotions led to the development of resilience at an individual level.

Emotions are a critical component of the lived experiences of leaders (Karp, 2014). The study explored the emotional experiences of leaders in the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders experienced multiple emotions due to the uncertainty posed by the pandemic, and those emotions influenced their behaviour toward their subordinates. While some leaders were good at managing their emotions, others were unsuccessful. This study supported earlier studies on crisis management and how higher emotional Intelligence lessens the frequency and intensity of unpleasant emotions (Soltani, Shahsavari, & Moradi, 2014; Sun et al., 2021). Emotional responses took the lead in sensemaking under these ambiguous conditions, aiding in constructing meanings about what was happening. It contributes to crisis leadership and emotional intelligence literature by suggesting that leaders must be highly emotionally intelligent to deal with the crisis successfully.

A resilient organization can "absorb disturbance and reorganize while changing to retain essentially still the same function, structure, identity, and feedback" (Walker, Holling, Carpenter, & Kinzig, 2004, p.6). Such an organization is a learning organization that maintains itself while responding to a crisis (Gunderson & Holling, 2002). Flexible and adaptable organizations quickly face any crisis's financial and political challenges, including the COVID-19 crisis (Szemző, Mosquera, Polyák, & Hayes, 2022). The current study emphasized the importance of adaptability and flexibility in responding to crises. The case studies in this study depicted the capacity to adjust to any new situation and were successful even during COVID-19. These companies sailed successfully through the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to maintain their leading position in the market, which is a huge success, and other organizations can learn from them.

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