

The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Societies:

An International Comparison

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INTRODUCTION

- The outburst of the coronavirus at the beginning of 2020 is a global phenomenon.
- It impacts people's lives all over the world regardless of their social economic status, background, and occupation.
- Everybody is required to adapt to the newly developed condition and environment the best way possible.
- It is interesting to disclose how people across nations respond to the pandemic which can serve as the foundation of a substantive analysis and hopefully provide a meaningful recommendation for further study.



RESEARCH METHOD

- The current research employs an in-depth interview to obtain data from nine different countries, namely: *Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam*.
- There are 85 respondents involved in the interview, each country contributing between 8-11 respondents.
- The research was a collaborative effort of different research agencies under the coordination of Weiden Haus – Singapore.
- Questions asked are within the scope of COVID-19 effects on respondents' daily activities, how they cope with it, and what (if any) changes they will consider to adopt permanently.



CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISON

- Each observed country has different prevalence and severity of COVID-19, as presented by the following table:

Country	Population (million)	Infected	Deaths
China	1,400.0	84,494	4,645
Cambodia	15.0	122	0
Indonesia	271.1	16,496	1,076
Japan	125.9	3,328	777
Malaysia	32.6	7,819	115
Singapore	5.6	26,098	21
Taiwan	23.8	440	7
Thailand	66.0	3,076	57
Vietnam	97.2	312	0

Source: Research partners –
combined Numbers are per
May 15th, 2020

RESPONDENT PROFILE

Each country contributed between 8 – 11 respondents, their profiles are elaborated below:

CHINA

- There were 8 respondents involved, within the age range of 25 – 54.
- Five of them were males and 3 were females.
- All working in the private sector either as an employee, entrepreneur, or self employed.



CAMBODIA

- There were 10 respondents involved aged 20 to 35 years old.
- Six respondents were females and 4 were males.
- All working in the private sector, some of which were university students doing part time clerical jobs.

INDONESIA

- Indonesia contributed 10 respondents within the age range of 24 and 50.
- Both genders were equally split: 5 males and 5 females.
- Occupation wise, Indonesian respondents were quite varied. There were government officials, entrepreneurs, and private sector employees.



JAPAN

- Japan also contributed 10 respondents, equally split into males and females.
- Respondents' age range was 23 – 54 years old.
- Nine of the respondents were employees and one was a home maker (housewife).

MALAYSIA

- Nine respondents participated within the age range of 25 – 39 years old.
- Five of them were males and four were females.
- Similar to that of Japan, all respondents work for the private sector and one was a home maker.



SINGAPORE

- There were 10 respondents involved from Singapore, aged 24 to 40 years old.
- Five respondents were males and five were females.
- Four of them worked as a government officials and six were in the private sector working as employees.

TAIWAN

- Eleven respondents were involved from Taiwan aged 31 to 68 years old.
- Gender wise, there were 4 female respondents involved and the other 7 were males.
- Occupation wise, respondents are distributed across various groups. There were government employees, private sector employees, and self-employed.



VIETNAM

- There were 8 respondents involved from Vietnam within the age range of 22 and 33 years old.
- Four respondents were males and four were females.
- Only one respondent was a government official, the remaining seven were employees in the private sector.

THAILAND

- Thailand contributed 9 respondents aged 24 to 62 years old; five of which were females.
- Among the nine, only one were self-employed, one was a housewife, the rest are company employees.

RESULTS

- Respondents were being interviewed about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on their daily activities and how they coped with it so far.
- Questions asked evolve from the general issue of their current lifestyle to a more specific matters such as changes (if any) of their eating habits and communicating method(s) due to the pandemic. Results for each country are presented below.





- By the time the interview was conducted, all respondents were already back to work. Some of them had alternating schedules with their coworkers to come to the office and to work from home. Those who didn't have alternating schedules found it challenging to go to work because travelling has been restricted.
- When it come to restrictions, different cities imposed different levels of strictness. Cities such as Wuhan still employed rigorous health protocols such as body temperature checking and the requirement to show their health code. The latter is imposed so that in the case that there's a COVID patient discovered, health officials can track their interactions with people and take necessary precaution steps.

- For all respondents, the biggest challenge caused by COVID-19 was the limited human interaction. It brings additional issues such as low business activities which correlates with high unemployment rates, inconvenience of cancelling planned trips, and of course the psychological burden of being isolated from one another.
- The pandemic also causes them to be confined at home. They can't go grocery shopping and left with no choice but to buy the groceries online. It can be unsatisfying at times since they can't hand-pick the produce they want and have to accept whatever is delivered to them by the store instead.
- Some respondents also highlighted the fear of becoming ill since it would require them to go to the hospital; the place which is not very safe considering the pandemic.

- Chinese respondents cope with the disheartening condition due to COVID-19 in various ways. Most of them tried to remain optimistic and happy by doing fun activities whenever possible. It ranges from learning how to cook, to doing outdoor activities such as hiking and jogging, to very low-key activities at home such as playing video games, reading, and lounging.
- When it comes to consumption, various changes had taken place. Some respondents stated that they tend to be more careful with their purchases and only buy things they need, instead of stocking up things like they used to do. Some mentioned buying disinfectant and face mask to help keeping them safe from the virus.

- ICT plays an unparalleled role in respondents' daily activities after the pandemic. While it was used mainly for communication prior to the pandemic outbreak, now it is used for work too by almost everybody. It helps them to coordinate job-related issues with their colleagues and to monitor work progress. It even helps with school tasks. So ICT advancement is quite beneficial.
- However, relying on ICT is not without its obstacle. Respondents reported that some jobs are still easier to do if one is physically there. Studying online is also challenging at times because not all professors are adept in incorporating ICT into their teaching.

- Every respondent stated that they would like to end the confinement and be able to be free again once the pandemic is over. Their plans range from either hiking, go to the beach, travel abroad, or even just get together with friends and chat.
- Respondents acknowledged that there are positive side of the pandemic, in which they are now forced to live more healthily. Even after the pandemic, they seemed to agree that maintaining a healthy lifestyle – such as washing your hands regularly, having enough sleep, and exercising – is important and worth maintaining even after the pandemic is over.



Cambodia



- Respondents in Cambodia already worked normally when the interview was conducted; mainly because Cambodia was not severely impacted by COVID-19 so a lockdown was not considered necessary. Aside from working, most respondents spend their days on social media or playing games since human interactions are restricted and travelling to/from some places were prohibited.
- There were five respondents from Cambodia who were also university students aside from working at the private sector. Professionally, these particular respondents have already gone back to work with regular working schedules. Academically, they continued their learning through online classes; which at the same time, posed the biggest COVID-19 related challenge for this group of respondents.

- The biggest challenge of life after COVID -19 for those who were non-students is correlated to the economic down-turn. One way or another, fear of being infected by the virus caused limited human activities and interactions. It induced business contraction causing unemployment rate to soar. It caused people to cut back on their spending which eventually lead back to contracted business activities.
- Every respondent acknowledged their gloomy feelings caused by the quarantine. Hence, they each came up with their ways of coping mechanism and tried to find something fun to do. Almost everybody turned into online entertainment; ranging from video games, music, movies, even online communication/ interactions with their relatives and friends.

- In general, respondents observed a change in their consumption pattern. The frequency of eating at restaurants or eating street foods was significantly reduced and they turned into home-cooked meals instead. A part of it is due to their awareness to stay safe by keeping their distance from people, the other part is due to the numerous restaurants being closed.
- When it comes to their communication and range of networks, respondents stated that the use of online communication was not something new – they already did it prior to the pandemic. However, it was acknowledged that the share of online communication relative to face-to-face communication increased significantly after the pandemic.

- Similar to those in China, Cambodian respondents stated that they would like to be able to travel and get together with their friends/ relatives again once the pandemic is over. Main reasons being that the quarantine has left them feeling lonely and depressed, they missed their friends/ relatives, and also they want to feel refreshed upon travelling. Specific to respondents who are university students, they would like to finish their study as soon as the pandemic is over
- Maintaining a hygienic lifestyle by cleaning their hands regularly (by washing them or using rubbing alcohol) and wearing a face mask remain to be the good practice respondents would like to do even after the pandemic is over.



Indonesia



- When the survey was conducted, almost all respondents from Indonesia were working; either from the office due to the nature of the job or from home whenever the office or the job allows.
- One of the respondents who did not work was a teacher assistant. It was because the school was already on summer break and it would not start until August. Another one who did not work was a young entrepreneur owning a coffee shop. The coffee shop was closed; partly because of the large-scale social restriction imposed by the government and partly because it was the month of Ramadhan.

- The economic impact of the pandemic remains to be the biggest concern for all respondents, especially for those working in the private sector. Their income is significantly reduced so some of the respondents had already had to use their saving or even liquidate their asset to fund for their expenses. Moreover, respondents were apprehensive about their lives and the lives of their loved ones since the ending of the pandemic is highly uncertain. It involves fear of being laid off, fear of business' sustainability, even fear of children's education and future.

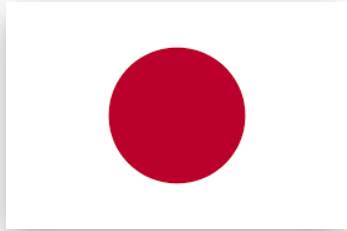
- For those who work for the government, the fear was not as apparent compared to those in the private sector. However, they did acknowledge the substantial challenge to complete their tasks since not everything can be done online. Sometimes it is difficult to decipher instructions given online and it's equally hard to ask around for clarifications.
- Respondents in Indonesia were familiar with online communication even prior to the pandemic, so it was not a drastic change with regards to their ways of communicating. Although the extent to which personal, face-to-face interaction has decreased is definitely noticeable. One respondent who worked as a nurse was even forbidden to return home and required to stay at the government-provided hotel at the beginning of the outbreak in order to guarantee his family's safety – in which case online communication is definitely crucial.

- The large-scale social restriction imposed and the fear inflicted by the virus is definitely discouraging. Consequently, Indonesian respondents tried to boost morale while keeping themselves safe through a number of ways. To name a few are gardening, cooking, and online entertainment – causing a spike in electricity bills.
- Despite the various negative impacts that COVID-19 has, Indonesian respondents acknowledged that it has some positive impacts too. First, it somewhat forces them to be more careful with their spending; focusing only on necessities. Second, it causes them to pay more attention on their health: watch what they eat – cutting back on junk food, exercise, and make sure they have enough sleep. Lastly, it also gives them a new perspective on how important family is. Realizing that the virus can take any of them at any time, they are compelled to spend more (quality) time with their family.

- All respondents seem to agree that they miss being able to travel and personally/ physically interact with their friends and relatives. These two activities dominated respondents answers on the subject of what they want to do once the pandemic is over.
- Similarly to respondents from China and Cambodia, Indonesian respondents also would like to maintain a healthy and hygienic lifestyle, namely: to wash hands frequently, eat healthy food, exercise, and having enough sleep. Additionally, being prudent about their spending is also something they would like to continue even after the pandemic.



Japan



- All respondents from Japan reported that there was no substantial change in their professional life: they were working as usual when the research was conducted. In fact, only a few respondents were working from home. It was mainly because there was no lockdowns imposed in the country.
- Consequently, challenges faced by Japanese respondents are mostly related to their daily activities instead of professionally. Complaints consist of inability to get together with friends, prohibition of travelling to visit parent, and inconvenience of having to wear a face mask all the time.

- Similar to respondents from three previously discussed countries, respondents from Japan opt for doing everything online in order to maintain safety. It includes shopping, entertainment and communication in lieu for personal, face-to-face interaction.
- Interestingly, Japanese respondents seemed to be ones who successfully maintain a positive attitude during the pandemic. One respondent said that staying home most of the time was actually preferable since she could spend more time with her husband. Another one stated that there was actually a beneficial effect of the pandemic. Not getting together with his friends actually induced him to find a fun activity aside from drinking which enabled him to cut back on his alcohol consumption.

- Picking up a healthier eating habit seems to be universally true for all respondents thus far. Japanese respondents also stated that they opt for home-cooked meals more instead of restaurant take-outs, especially junk/fast food. On the other hand, some also stated that they consume more snacks too since they have more free time at home.
- Being able to travel and get together with friends and relatives remain to be the activities most respondents want to do once the pandemic is over. When it comes to efforts to remain healthy such as wearing a face mask and washing hands frequently, respondents stated that this is going to be maintained even after the pandemic is over.





- In Malaysia, most respondents stated that currently they are leading a rather laid-back life: non-committed, happy-go-lucky, relaxed. They spend most of their time staying home and hanging out with their families. Only one respondent in particular saying his life is pretty stressful which probably has something to do with his job as an IT Engineer. Since most people are working from home, communicating, even playing online due to the imposed lockdowns, there was a high demand in technical support in order to guarantee that everything goes smoothly.

- The challenge of having to restrict almost all direct human interactions is considered to be the hardest part of being quarantined for Malaysian respondents. The physical distancing rule imposed created rather long queues at stores, making it hard to do grocery shopping.
- They also felt that their freedom is somewhat diminished. There are so many activities that they used to do that is now prohibited, such as: visiting restaurants or cafes to get together with friends and acquaintances, getting late night food, exercising at the gym, and doing outdoor activities. It is burdensome to have to be mindful of everything. It is difficult to even breathe freely because now they have to put a face mask all the time.

- The gloomy feeling was overcome through various ways, such as: reading novels, watching movies, and playing video games. Everything was done online in observance with the restriction imposed. Other respondents turned to their family members and get together with them for a relieve; mostly by playing various types of games.
- Malaysian respondents show similarity with those of Indonesia, Japan, and other previous countries in the context of consumption pattern. They, too, reduced their consumption of junk food and turn to healthier, home-cooked meals – which was realized as a way to cut back on spending and save money. Some also highlighted that since they can no longer go to restaurants, they have food delivered to them instead.

- Most respondents reported that after the pandemic, they have become more aware of their personal hygiene. They would wash or sanitize their hands whenever possible. However, there were also a few of them who did not observe any significant change when it comes to their personal hygiene; in sense that they continued doing what they had been doing prior to the pandemic.
- Consistent with respondents from previous countries, Malaysian respondents also stated that they miss being able to do their previous habits. So they would like to be able to do them again once the pandemic is over. It involves, for instance: going the gym to recover their deteriorated stamina, hanging out with their friends, and also doing outdoor activities.

- Despite many negative impacts that COVID-19 has on people's lives, it was also realized by the respondents that it changes their lives for the better. It makes them more aware of their health in general and their personal hygiene specifically. They would like to continue eating healthy, home-cooked meals and frequently washing their hands once the pandemic subsides.
- Additionally, they also acknowledged that the pandemic makes them more financially frugal and watch closely what they spend their money on. This is also good practice they would like to continue doing in the future.





- When the research was conducted, Singapore is rather high in the number of people infected by the virus – percentage wise – due to the relatively low number of population living in the country.
- However, all ten respondents involved stated that they were doing their work/ household chores as usual. Some even still went to the office despite the imposition of a lockdown, although the majority of them worked from home in which case rely rather heavily on the internet to complete their task(s). It ranges from email, text messages, even video calls with their clients/ colleagues/ supervisor.

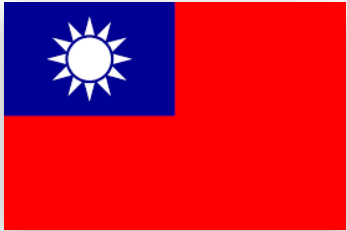
- For Singaporean respondents, the biggest challenge of life after COVID-19 is having to adjust the way they work. For those who worked from home (especially women), having to balance between work and household chores such as tending to their children and cooking can be quite distracting.
- Coordinating with colleagues was also challenging despite the availability of online communication. Some problems still require – or at least easier to solve with – direct, face-to-face interaction. Hence, sometimes it takes longer to solve a problem that actually requires an immediate solution.

- Additionally, not all work-related activities (such as printing a document and have it signed by the superior officer) are remotely doable. In this case they would have to have it delivered to the office by a courier service which inflicts an additional cost. However, some respondents highlighted the convenience of working from home in a sense that they are not required to put much attention to personal grooming as often as they did when working from the office.
- Aside from the professional adjustments, respondents also found shifting from their usual daily activities to be unpleasant. They were now hindered from visiting the gym to exercise, getting a haircut, even breathing normally/ freely due to the face mask requirement.

- When it comes to their health, respondents emphasized on various aspects. Most of them realized that they eat home-cooked meals more often after the pandemic. Those who cannot cook very well opt for restaurant take-outs instead of visiting the restaurants to stay safe. Others highlighted the noticeable weight gain caused by rather limited physical activities and their newly developed habit of constant snacking – induced by urges to overcome boredom.
- Since the pandemic was still on its rise when the research was conducted, all respondents admitted that they picked up the health safety protocols by wearing a face mask, washing their hands, and keeping a clean environment.

- All respondents agree that they miss all activities they used to do before COVID-19 and would really like to do them again as soon as the pandemic is over. Comparable to respondents from other countries, these activities predominantly involved personal and direct interaction with people as well as executing the postponed travel plans.
- Still similar to responds obtained from their counterparts from other countries, Singaporean respondents would like to maintain a healthy lifestyle even after the pandemic subsides; especially watching what they eat and exercising regularly.





- Compared to the nine countries surveyed, Taiwan is among those with a low percentage of people infected by the coronavirus. Hence, the fact that all respondents were working as usual and their usual activities were not substantially altered were understandable.
- Regardless, life after the pandemic for Taiwanese respondents is not without its struggle. They did observe a contraction in business activities. For instance, because people chose to stay away from stores/ malls retails witnessed a decline in sales. Those with foreign partners/ clients were also forced to postpone their business due to the imposed lockdown which forbade these partners to come into the country.

- Restriction on foreigners also impacts the tourism industry. It compels the Taiwanese government to create a training program for tourism industry workers – one of which was the respondent – in order to maintain or even improve their productivity.
- The pandemic causes respondents to be more alert and aware of their surroundings. Most importantly, they put on face mask whenever they are in public places such as in schools or in their office/factory, mainly because in those places air circulation is not at its best. They also put masks and keep their distances with other people when they do outdoor activities such as hiking.

- Respondents also started to pick up more hygienic lifestyle, such as washing their hands frequently and applying disinfectant on their belongings. They also cut back on eating at restaurants and opt for home-cooked meals or take-outs instead. Whenever they need to go to a store, they would seriously heed the social/ physical distancing protocol to protect themselves, their families, and others.
- Taiwanese respondents stated that there were several plans to travel overseas they had made that had to be cancelled due to the pandemic. These travelling plans were the top things they would like to resume after the pandemic is over and they're allowed to freely go around. Aside international travels, those who live separately from their families would also like to be reunited with their families.

- All respondents thought there were not very many newly developed, post pandemic habits that need to be maintained. All of them focused on keeping themselves healthy and hygienic by washing their hands frequently, exercising, and take care of one another among the family.





- As one of the countries with considerable prevalence of COVID-19, Thailand imposed a lockdown which had a noticeable impact on our respondents. Quite a few of them were already jobless, especially those working in tourism, entertainment, and lifestyle related industries. With travel bans being imposed, tourism activities sharply declined causing substantial reduction in the industry's income which lead to massive unemployment.
- Consequently, almost all of the respondents were staying home. They either did somewhat productive activities such as gardening or purely entertainment oriented ones such as watching movies, browsing social media, or playing online games.

- For those who still had their jobs, they worked from home with the internet being their fundamental tool to complete their tasks and assignments. So the internet becomes crucial to Thai respondents in the post-pandemic life, be it for work, communication, or entertainment purposes.
- Other than finding entertainment online, some respondents took on a rather old-fashioned way to spend their time at home such as tending their gardens or play with their pets, especially dogs. Still, another group of respondents chose to spend time with their family members.

- It was generally true for Thai respondents that the requirements to wear a face mask all the time and keep a distance with one-another are quite a shift in their lives. They still need to adjust themselves with this new habit which some think would take some time.
- It also seems to be generally true for almost all respondents everywhere that the pandemic causes them to switch their habit of eating out at restaurants to eating home-cooked meals. They also traded fast/ junk food with healthier food predominantly fruit and vegetables.

- Lastly, all Thai respondents admitted that they missed the old lifestyle. Especially the freedom to travel and go about elsewhere, also to be able to interact with their friends and loved ones. They would also like the lockdowns to be released soon because they believed that human activities will resume afterwards. Business will recover employment will pick back up.



Vietnam





- Until the middle of May, Vietnam recorded the lowest percentage of infected cases amongst nine countries involved in this research. Despite the fact, all respondents from Vietnam acknowledged the requirement of health safety protocols where they lived. It was even mandated by the government to practice social distancing, wearing face mask in public places, as well as washing hands frequently. Crowd gathering was also strictly prohibited in many provinces and cities.

- All respondents reported a change in their working hours since the outbreak of COVID-19, especially during the period of mandated social distancing. Some worked only 2-3 days per week while some maintain the number of days but reduced the hours.
- Still, others witnessed a peculiar working hour which varies across respondents. One respondent reported from working full time but doing it from home. Another one had an alternating schedule between work from office and work from home. One particular respondent, however, reported that her working schedule becomes uncertain. Sometimes she has to come to the office, sometimes works from home, she could be working during weekends if required.

- The significant change in their working hours brings changes in their daily activities as well. Prior to the pandemic, their days were dominated by work; and quite busy as well. After the pandemic, their days become more relaxed so they have more time to spend on themselves and their families.
- Mostly, they spend their leisure time playing games, watching movies and listening to music; all done online. Some used their spare time developing new hobbies such as gardening, cooking and baking. Some others picked up reading which can be quite productive since they learned new things this way. Of course, there is also time leftover to spend to hang out with their families.

- The pandemic has a substantial impact on economic activity and respondents' financial standing. Those who are business owners complained about a decrease in the company's revenue due to the reduction of human activities. On another side, workers' reduced working hours resulted in the reduction of their salaries.
- On top of the economic challenges, social distancing imposition restricts them from eating at restaurants which can be overcome by ordering restaurant take-outs. However, the opportunity to get together with their friends or relatives that disappeared due to the pandemic cannot be replaced by anything which caused them to feel rather distraught.

- The internet played an unparalleled role in respondents' lives after the pandemic. Not only does it help them with work and leisure, but it also helps them in maintaining communication with their loved ones despite the fact that it does not remotely substitute the satisfaction obtained from direct human interaction.
- The pleasure of having a direct human interaction and the warm feeling it brings proved to be the reason behind respondents' desire to resume into social gathering and travelling upon the appeasement of the pandemic. Although knowing that the virus might linger for quite a while, respondents plan to keep a healthy and hygienic lifestyle ahead. It includes eating healthy food, exercising, frequently washing hands, and wearing face mask.

CONCLUSIONS

- The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic at the end of 2019 brought an undisputed impact on people's lives regardless of their nationality, gender, or socioeconomic class.
- The current research would like to find out COVID-19 effects on respondents' daily activities, how they cope with it, and what (if any) changes they will consider to adopt permanently. It employs an in-depth interview research method in order to obtain data from 85 respondents belonging to nine countries, namely: China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam.

- Unanimously, all respondents reported the significant, negative, economic impact caused by the pandemic correlated mainly with the limited human interaction and mobility. Other than that, the disrupted human interaction also brought an uneasy feeling of isolation. It explains why every respondent stated that being reunited with their families, relatives and friends is the activity they would want to resume once the pandemic dissipates.
- There is over a silver lining in every bad situation. Some of our respondents tried to maintain a positive attitude and see the pandemic as a way to reorient their lives and rearrange their priorities. Almost all respondents said that they would like to maintain a healthy lifestyle as well as prioritizing on their families even after the pandemic is over.