

The Deteriorating Role of Active Transactional Leadership on Employees Perceived Uncertainty and Emotional Exhaustion: Evidence from Educational Sector of Thailand

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Abstract: *Given the seriousness of the COVID-19 crisis that impacted organizations all over the world, study on the operational variables impacting the psychological well-being of the workers of an organization affected by the crisis has been insufficient. Therefore, the present study aimed to highlight the role of active transactional leadership of employees' emotional exhaustion through their perceived uncertainties. For this purpose, a cross-sectional study has been carried out among 309 employees working in Thai educational sector and the data was collected through self-administered questionnaires. The collected data was then analyzed by adopting PLS-SEM approach using SmartPLS 3.0 software. The findings of the study confirmed the direct relationships of active transactional leadership with perceived uncertainties. Also, the study established the direct association of perceived uncertainties with employee emotional exhaustion. The findings further confirmed the mediation of perceived uncertainties between the relationship of active transactional leadership and employee emotional exhaustion.*

Keywords: *Active transactional leadership, Perceived uncertainties, Emotional exhaustion.*

1. Introduction

The pandemic of COVID-19 triggered major disturbance of market practices and processes of almost all sectors (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). The recession not only impacts organizations financially but influences the job and psychological well-being of workers impacted by the crisis (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Khan & Khurshid, 2017). There are also detrimental effects of the catastrophe in the education sector (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020). The continuing COVID-19 pandemic is prevalent in the area of education across the world. Private international universities in particular appear to be an education sector that is one of the most impacted by the "COVID-19" disaster, because their maneuvers and income is deeply driven by student inscriptions from abroad. The sudden fall in new student enrolment not only has a financial effect on colleges, it also poses several uncertainties for faculty and workers (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020). In addition to concentrating on transitioning to distance learning, certain universities might have to reduce operational pressure created by the situation by reducing their staffing levels or fusion with others (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020). These developments impose strain on the workers in the education sector and instability. Considering that workers eventually encounter a high degree of anxiety and depression due to the COVID-19 situation, it is

necessary to analyze organizational causes to reduce the effect of the turmoil on the workers' mental levels of stress. Regarding the COVID 19 pandemic is already a comparatively recent development, study fields of management are still very selective to try to understand the effect of the crisis on the psychological well-being of workers, and to participate in organizations.

It was evaluated by Bass (1985) as a top-down corporate management strategy, but Bass and Avolio (1994) sees it as a link to benefit sharing. Bass (1997) think that transactional leadership between chief and follower is a reward-punishment arrangement. In the other side, Burns (1978) and Northouse (2013) suggest that transactional representatives are the most self-motivated ones. A transactional leader relies on effective communication as their achievement of the mission depends solely on their efficiency of accurately transmitting the assignment to their workplace team. They remind their workers of the method and result of accomplishing a mission and even educate them about the corresponding incentives (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

A leader monitors his workforce's performance and guides them as and when appropriate. Leader guarantees maximum productivity and efficiency of mission results. A manager often makes the employee reflect, if any on anomalies and mistakes. Bass and Riggio (2006) claimed that the leader who manages certain mistakes, grievances or deficiencies actively is a leader who insists not only on errors but also encourages staff to cope with these. He tries to warn them of their mistakes so that they may meet a higher level. Such leaders often adjust their behavior to the circumstances and take remedial action which however, is often detrimental in the long term.

This study is focused on the multinational private Thai higher educational institution which have been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. The study aims first to examine the consequence of the “perceived uncertainties” on the mental exhaustion of University workers over the impact of the “COVID-19” catastrophe on them. Secondly, the function of active transactional leadership as an operational variable that could enhance the perceived insecurity of workers. Previous research has demonstrated that active management by exception (active transactional leadership) play a negative role in enhancing the difficulties and vagueness faced by workers in a business (Martínez-Córcoles & Stephanou, 2017; Stordeur, D’Hoore, & Vandenberghe, 2001), which can increase the degree of confusion in which employees have experienced a “COVID-19” catastrophe. The role of the active transactional leadership may be critical.

2. Literature Review

“A sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operation and poses a financial and reputational threat” (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). The psychological consequences of a crisis typically take the shape of uncertainties people perceive when they encounter a crisis. Generally speaking, uncertainty is described as the inability of an individual to accurately predict something (Rast, Hogg, & Giessner, 2013). Specifically, the condition of COVID-19 is called a problem affecting corporate financial security and the psychological well-being of workers in almost every field across the world. In the area of research, private foreign universities appear to be specifically and most seriously impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.

The recession causes in several respects’ uncertainties for university workers. Firstly, the recession has contributed to a dramatic decline in college attendance. Given that private foreign universities' revenues rely heavily on students from abroad being admitted, the sharp decline in admission is likely to generate a sense of work insecurity between employees because the university is able to decrease (that is, reduce the number of staff). In addition, administrators, faculty and personnel must create strategies to sustain the interest of students throughout the crisis (Mhlanga & Molo, 2020). In addition, university divisions also discuss the problems and needs of students and parents, which raise employee workload and emotional pressure. University workers can often find it impossible to have instant answers to queries, so the university administrators may examine the scenario and take the time to determine. Given that the faculty and personnel associate with individuals from partner organizations and students from different countries, there may be health concerns for those worried about the

transmission of the virus. Overall, the condition of COVID-19 tends to be a problem for jobs in foreign private universities, since it generates and presents big questions regarding insecurity, confusion and vigilance. As a consequence of the uncertainties created by the crisis, the workers at these universities are very vulnerable to psychological stress (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020).

Stress is a situation for a person in a job in which he or she faces a thousand duties to perform, which are difficult to complete (Blanco-Álvarez & Thoen, 2017). The rate of stress has grown by 10% since 2001 (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020). In this time several stressors have become prevalent, including the need to respond to rapid shifts in working conditions as a consequence of technical advances. Some people can respond quickly to these shifts, whilst for others they are considered to be a threat to their well-being. Business administrators are mindful that tension is a key problem, since elevated stress levels of workers inevitably result in inefficient employees, higher workforce attrition, decreased efficiency and quantity of work activities, increased health insurance expenses, diminished work satisfaction and lower productivity (Carmody, Reed, Kristeller, & Merriam, 2008; Stordeur et al., 2001).

Organizations must build plans to resolve disruptive and expensive stressors, and people who do not do this may find their workers searching out for better jobs. Excessive overtime work and high work pressure in developed nations has a destructive impact due to tension. It is induced by causes within an organization and beyond it. The development of a stable manufacturing community could contribute to less disputes, but no organization has removed tension. Factors relating to an individual or his or her condition can contribute to stress, eventually resulting in self-degradation, poor efficiency and negative self-efficiency, contributing to poor functioning for a person (Blanco-Álvarez & Thoen, 2017; Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2015; Mungania, Waiganjo, & Kihoro, 2016).

Review of past literature reveals that the psychological well-being of workers may be harmed by an operational crisis (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Martínez-Córcoles & Stephanou, 2017; Stordeur et al., 2001). Emotional exhaustion is a specific form of psychological effect that workers undergo from a crisis. Emotional exhaustion is the core component of work burnout that occurs as people struggle from tension for a long period (Nantsupawat et al., 2011; Niessen, Mäder, Stride, & Jimmieson, 2017). People with mental exhaustion begin to lose energy and believe they have little influence or influence of anything that happens on the job (Martínez-Córcoles & Stephanou, 2017; Stordeur et al., 2001). Emotional exhaustion will greatly impact workers' morale, efficiency and mental wellbeing, diminishing their dedication to their jobs and contributing to absenteeism and an end to their work. The degree to which university workers experience confusion about the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis will raise their level of emotional exhaustion. In fact, confusion regarding developments during the crisis, and its effects, seem to render workers skeptical of the possibility of success of the organization and its effect on them (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Rast et al. (2013) also believed that perceived insecurity would induce fear of failure because of its negative impact on one's control locus. In this regard, workers who are unsure regarding a condition cannot plan or cope successfully with the unexpected (Grobben, 2009). Since the crisis of COVID-19 triggered several unexpected events which disrupted the work and operations of the workers and faculty members of the universities and since the period needed to fix the situation or to become better is not understood, employees are often concerned by the repercussions and therefore are more likely to grow emotive. The following hypothesis would therefore be offered: presumed ambiguity on the consequences of the COVID 19 crisis among university workers will raise emotional exhaustion.

The goal of this research is to mitigate the degree of perceived insecurity and emotional exhaustion induced by the COVID-19 crisis among employees by highlighting the factors that can affect negatively. Therefore, it is vital to highlight some factors that have a positive impact on employee well-being i.e. supervisory support. Supervisor help reveals the extent to which their supervisor respects subordinates (Ramus & Steger, 2000). Help from managers demonstrates the consistency of employees' interaction with supervisors, which describes the level to which employees are conscious that their supervisors are concerned with their own specific interests and well-being (Mayer, Nurmohamed, Treviño, Shapiro, &

Schminke, 2013). Students said supervisor help played a role in promoting optimistic attitudes among workers in their company (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020). The position of supervisor support in particular is essential to maintain the moral and psychological well-being of employees in times of crisis (Cole & Bruch, 2006). For instance, a research by Cole and Bruch (2006), focused on the case of a Swiss medical technology corporation, showed that the employer appeared to be a supporter in minimizing workers' cynisme during an operational crisis. Furthermore, at its philosophical roots, transactional management has transfers between leaders and workers (Marianne Tromp & Jan Blomme, 2014), and we thus describe it as the use of contingent incentives and punishments. While transactional and transformational leadership both aimed at achieving organization's aims, the major distinction being that we see transactional leadership actions as structured to build employee self-interest in achieving the targets, while theoretical transformation leadership is focused on an intention for workers to overcome self-interest. Transactional leadership thus requires the usage of contingent incentives and penalties to ensure that particular workers follow themselves while leading to the accomplishment of the corporate objective. This relies on the premise that individual workers' self-interest will coincide with the interest of the company by reasonable rewards. Only contingent incentives and fines are relevant: If workers are paid or disciplined, such transactions should contribute specifically to the real commitment or success of employees. The transactions cannot otherwise be assumed to be successful.

We comply with the distinction in the principle of incentives and penalties in its entirety, but in compliance with Jing, Avery, and Bergsteiner (2019), we argue that it is necessary to refine the difference by also distinguishing between rewards and penalties in terms of the separate consequences. The results of financial incentives may be detrimental in public organizations (Lazear, 2000). Particularly when financial rewards are seen as regulating, they could crowd out intrinsic motivation. Consequently, we describe transactional leadership as requiring the usage of three forms of actions – success or effort –: the use of contingent non-specific incentives, contingent pecuniary rewards, and contingent penalties. The differentiation between various forms of incentives is strongly justified, in fact, in regards to the applicability for private and public organizations. Since public administrators are not as materialistic, they are expected to have a different reward-related approach relative to private officials, and whether they use incentives lower than private managers or merely substitute material rewards with non-material rewards is a scientific concern (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014). The updated conceptualization of transactional leadership would allow potential research to decide not only whether public officials use fewer resources than private administrators, but also whether they use different non-special incentives. All three habits, if appreciated by workers, will potentially have a possible effort-inducing impact but the context of penalties and the two forms of incentives may be different (Lazear, 2000). For instance, pecuniary incentives may be gifts and advantages, whereas non-peculiar rewards may be recognition. Sanctions are the last kind of performance-contingent action, such as the punishing of mistakes, harmful efforts, and deviations of performance.

H1: There is a direct relationship of active transactional leadership with employees perceived uncertainties.

H2: There is a direct relationship of employees perceived uncertainties with emotional exhaustion.

H3: Employees perceived uncertainties mediates the relationship between active transactional leadership and emotional exhaustion.

3. Methodology

This study gathered data from employees, including lecturers and staff from private foreign universities in Thailand. These private international universities would be an appropriate framework to analyze the implications of the COVID-19 crisis since they are one of the universities adversely impacted by it. All institutions have a high number of students from abroad. As the COVID-19 crisis has forced the admission rate of their students abroad to decline significantly, their salaries have declined drastically. This fall in sales and the continuing costs colleges also raised major risks to workers' protection at work. Many workers in particular are unsure regarding their job stability, as reduction has

been extended to some jobs and work groups in order to save costs. The COVID-19 crisis has left faculty and workers unsure regarding their working activities and raised their workload. Since the teaching and much of the faculty's and staff's everyday jobs already need to be completed electronically, it causes ambiguity and challenges for faculty and staff who are not acquainted with online teaching or online work. However, although teaching and other job processes have been moved online, some faculty and workers are still expected to go to universities physically to conduct such administrative duties that render them concerned and feel unsure as regards the likelihood of catching the virus on their trip. All the uncertainties faced by the workers as a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis render them very emotionally vulnerable. The aim of this study was to define the relationship of transactional leadership with perceived uncertainties and employee exhaustion in Thailand's education sector. Therefore, we questioned 309 workers employed in Thailand's foreign universities. In this study the construct of active transactional leadership was measured by 7-items active management by exception (MBEA) scale (Avolio & Bass, 2004), the construct of perceived uncertainties was assessed by 10-items scale (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020) and emotional exhaustion was assessed by 5-items scale (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The researchers use the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to describe the findings data for both the direction analysis and the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). This helps the reliability and validity of the instrument to be measured while defining the effect of each part. Blindfolding was also conducted to test the statistical relevance of the model technically evaluated in Q-square terminology. In addition, the model accuracy based on the R-squared and adjusted R-squared was determined. This has reflected in research on SmartPLS, which does not require a normal distribution of data since it relies on PLS-SEM.

4. Results

In this section of the report, the CFA measurement was performed by the investigator and is used to test the measurement model. In this way, the internal consistency of each latent variable needing a minimum rational value of 0.6 was tested in terms of composite reliability and Cronbach Alpha (Avkiran & Ringle, 2018). Thus, the results from Table 1 suggest that all latent constructs or variables in this study are stable as the lowest alpha value of Cronbach is calculated to be 0.706, whereas the composite reliability value was estimated to be 0.798. In addition to this the assessment of external loading, which was also carried out by the investigator, is another important aspect of the CFA study. The threshold value for external loading is 0.5 (Hair, Hollingsworth, Randolph, & Chong, 2017). From Figure 1 and Table 1, it is also feasible to view that all outer load values are greater than 0.5, while the lowest value is 0.545. Furthermore, the value of outer loadings using bootstrapping was also identified, which was found to be important. In the other hand, the relationship and relation of latent systems have been tested in terms of convergent validity, thus the AVE threshold is 0.5 (Muthoni, 2019; Shah & Rahim, 2019). Table 1 reveals that all variables have convergent validity in this regard, since the minimum AVE was 0.514.

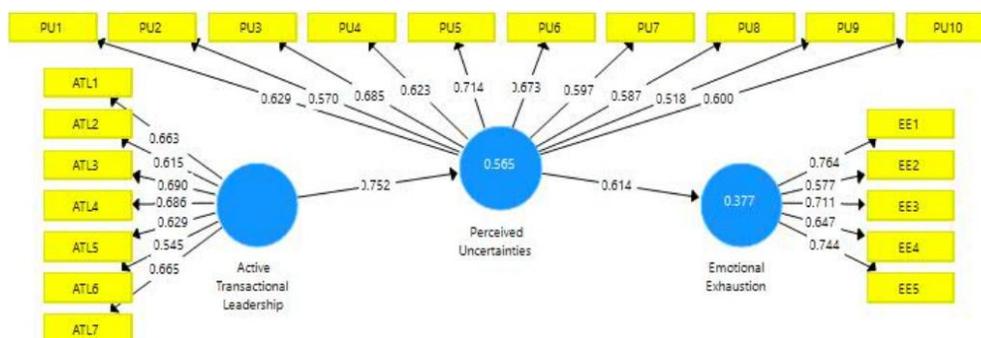


Figure-1.
Estimations of measurement model.

The analysis found that both constructs had adequate psychometric properties before model estimates utilising PLS-SEM. In order to validate satisfactory degree of convergent validity the convergent validity is evaluated with factor loadings which must be above 0.5 (Hair., Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017; Rahim & Shah, 2020). Both the latent constructs' factor loadings were above .5, confirming adequate convergent validity. Second, a measure of the square root of the average variance derived (AVE) and the associated correlations with other variables, evaluated discriminatory validity. The square root of the AVE for each construct must surpass its correlation with every other construct to support discriminant validity. In addition, HTMT ratio has then been used to evaluate the distinctive meaning of two variables while the maximum appropriate value for HTMT is 0.85 (Kock, 2015). The AVEs' square roots and the associations between the variables and HTMT are presented in in Table 2 and Table 3. The findings recorded in Table 2 indicate that this criterion was fulfilled by all the square roots of the AVEs; thus, discriminant validity was satisfactory. Thirdly, using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and a hybrid reliability coefficient, the efficiency of construct reliability was calculated. All the alphas were .70 or higher; the stability of all the structures was also satisfactory.

Table-1.
Measurement Model

Items	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
ATL1	0.663	0.763	0.831	0.514
ATL2	0.615			
ATL3	0.690			
ATL4	0.686			
ATL5	0.629			
ATL6	0.545			
ATL7	0.665			
EE1	0.764	0.738	0.820	0.579
EE2	0.577			
EE3	0.711			
EE4	0.647			
EE5	0.744			
PU1	0.629	0.822	0.862	0.587
PU2	0.570			
PU3	0.685			
PU4	0.623			
PU5	0.714			
PU6	0.673			
PU7	0.597			
PU8	0.587			
PU9	0.518			
PU10	0.600			

Table-2.
Fornell and larcker criterion for discriminant validity

	Active Transactional Leadership	Emotional Exhaustion	Perceived Uncertainties
Active Transactional Leadership	0.744		
Emotional Exhaustion	0.67	0.792	
Perceived Uncertainties	0.652	0.614	0.722

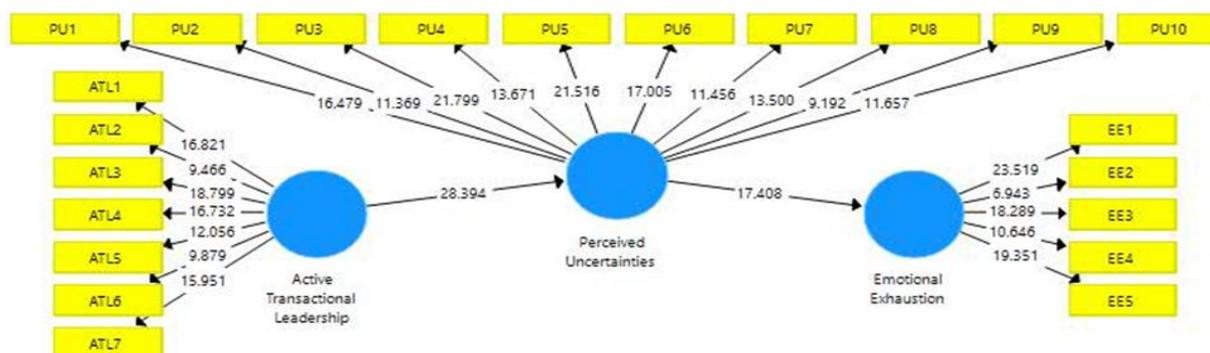
Table-3.

Heterotrait-Monotrait Criterion for Discriminant Validity.

	Active Transactional Leadership	Emotional Exhaustion	Perceived Uncertainties
Active Transactional Leadership			
Emotional Exhaustion	0.773		
Perceived Uncertainties	0.731	0.732	

5. Hypothesis Testing

The effects of the PLS-SEM assessment are stated in Figure 1. The latent variable's factor values have been determined using PLS algorithms and measured in an appropriate linear combination of the predictor effects. After testing the estimation model that helps evaluate the reliability and relevance of variables in latent constructs, the researcher evaluated the relevance of hypothesized pathways in the Model output. Therefore, with the aid of bootstrapping, the relevance and influence were checked, whereas the findings were presented in Table 4 and Figure 2. In the analysis of Hair. et al. (2017), it was claimed that in order to assess the meaning, bootstrapping is the method of subsampling and resampling. In relation to the hypothesis that the active transactional leadership raises perceived uncertainties of university workers, the findings contained in Table 4 show that the impact of active transactional leadership on the perceived uncertainties in Thailand's education industry is established ($B = 0.752$; $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.01$). In addition, based on the coefficient findings, this impact is also estimated to be positive and implies that change in active transactional leadership will contribute to perceived uncertainties in Thailand's education industry. In addition, the impact of the perceived uncertainties on emotional exhaustion ($B = 0.614$; $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.01$) is also shown to be established. On the other side based on the coefficient rating, the result was also found to be optimistic, which suggests that increased perceived uncertainties would contribute to improved emotional exhaustion in Thailand's education industry. Lastly, the mediation of perceived uncertainties between the relationship of active transactional leadership and emotional exhaustion is also established in this study ($B = 0.46$; $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.01$).

**Figure-2.**

Estimations of structural model.

Table-4.

Hypotheses Results.

Hypothesis	Beta	S.E	T Value	P Value	CI ^{BCa} Low	CI ^{BCa} High	Decision
ATL -> PU	0.752	0.026	28.394	0.000	0.698	0.799	Supported
PU -> EU	0.614	0.035	17.408	0.000	0.53	0.667	Supported
ATL -> PU -> EE	0.462	0.036	12.853	0.000	0.375	0.515	Supported

Note: ATL = Active Transactional Leadership, PU = Perceived Uncertainties, EU = Emotional Exhaustion.

* Significance level < 0.05.

6. Discussion

The results of the hypothesis test active transaction management to explain the “perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion” experienced by workers in the COVID-19 predicament. The results first confirm the impact of perceived uncertainties on the emotional exhaustion of the employee. These results add to previous studies, that exhibited that incertitude during a disaster is a crucial issue in psychologically distressed and anxious employees (Stordeur et al., 2001). This also encourages the nature of a disaster, that produces “fear of loss” and adversely impacts the position of control of employees, thus restrict their capability to pact effectively with the indefinite (Martínez-Córcoles & Stephanou, 2017).

Secondly, the results demonstrate the positive link between active transactional leadership and the perceived uncertainties of employees. The analysis also shows that the relationship between active transactional leadership and emotional exhaustion can be significantly mediated by perceived uncertainties. This finding shows that active transactional leadership increases emotional exhaustion by increasing the perceived uncertainty they experience about the influence of the “COVID-19” catastrophe. Overall, the results of previous research and literature concerning the role of active transactional leaders in the crisis show that supervisors play an important role in the psychological impact on employees (Martínez-Córcoles & Stephanou, 2017; Stordeur et al., 2001). This is consistent with the study conducted by (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020), which found that supervisors can influence the desire of employees to leave their jobs through job insecurity. This is in agreement with the findings of Stordeur et al. (2001) that emphasize the significance of leaders in dealing employee issues throughout an organizational disaster, in particular in the context of a crisis.

This study offers advice to high leadership on strategies that might be required throughout the “COVID 19” catastrophe to improve the damaging psychological effects the disaster has on employees. With respect to the role of leadership, which was found to affect university employees' uncertainties and emotional exhaustion throughout the disaster, managers should be allowed to provide and encouraged the leaders of all divisions to support their employees to deal their issues in the catastrophe. Though, it is vital for leaders that features of the working environment in the company can affect the capacity of leaders to use their powers to effectively assist workers. Given that supervisors need adequate independence to take swift action to deal with employees' uncertainties in a disaster, leadership must give supervisors more “flexibility and autonomy so that they can take their own actions” to deal with their employees' skepticism and to alleviate their concerns. “This policy recommendation may be crucial for organizations to alleviate the psychological impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees.”

Some restrictions on research must be noted. Firstly, the research findings are based on Thailand's private international universities. Furthermore, the sample size for the collection of data is relatively small, which can reduce the generalizability of results. Second, the cross-sectional data collection carried out in this study limits the possibility of interpreting the results in terms of their causality, and the results are more likely to be interpreted as associations. However, in view of the brief period of time that COVID-19 created uncertainty between university employees, this limitation is unavoidable – it was difficult to design and carry out a longitudinal study within a short period of time. Third, as the data were collected with a self-reporting questionnaire, some subjective distortion of the results may occur.

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