

COPING MECHANISMS ADOPTED BY PEOPLE DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN ZIMBABWE

Tsitsi Chirombe

Julius Nyerere School of Social Sciences, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe
tsitsichirombe@gmail.com

Sharon Benza

Julius Nyerere School of Social Sciences, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe
shbenza@gmail.com

Epiphania Munetsi

Julius Nyerere School of Social Sciences, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe
emunetsi2005@yahoo.co.uk.

Herbert Zirima

Julius Nyerere School of Social Sciences, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe
hzirima@gzu.ac.zw

Abstract

In response to the outbreak of COVID 19 cases in Zimbabwe, the government declared a twenty-one-day lockdown beginning the 30th of March 2020. This study sought to analyse the coping mechanisms that people adopted to survive the lockdown. Specifically, the study explored the social, psychological, religious and physical coping mechanisms adopted by Zimbabweans. A qualitative approach was taken in doing this study, specifically making use of the document analysis design. Data was then collected from a social media platform which is WhatsApp. Forty WhatsApp messages and status updates were analyzed in this research. The lockdown presented challenges and opportunities; some people were struggling to cope yet some saw this as an opportunity to do things that they had no time for. The study revealed that people resorted to WhatsApp groups to connect with workmates, friends, schoolmates and relatives. Most Zimbabweans resorted to indoor games with their family members, exercise, listening to music and gardening. With the restricted movement imposed as a result of lockdown, people had to engage in prayer and other religious activities in their homes. Students found the lockdown as a good opportunity to engage in research and also made use of platforms such as the Google Classroom to continue learning. The study recommends that Zimbabweans should follow government regulations in order to curb the spread of COVID 19 and similar pandemics in the future.

Keywords: Lockdown, coping, psychological, social, COVID-19, Zimbabwe.

1. INTRODUCTION

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses which may cause illness in humans as well as in animals. In humans, there are several coronaviruses that are known to cause respiratory infections that range from the common cold to diseases that are as severe as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) as well as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) (WHO, 2020). COVID-19 is the most recently discovered coronavirus disease. This new virus and disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Xu et al., 2020). Since the aetiology of the illness is attributed to a novel virus belonging to the coronaviruses (CoV) family the WHO Director - General announced in February 2020 that the disease caused by this new CoV was COVID 19 which is the acronym of "Coronavirus disease 2019" (Cascella et al. 2020) According to the report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), the COVID-19 virus is very unique among human coronaviruses because of its combination of substantial fatal outcomes especially in high-risk groups, it is highly transmissible, and has the ability to cause huge economic as well as societal disruption.

Since its first outbreak in late December 2019 in Wuhan, (Xu, et al., 2020) the largest metropolitan area in China's Hubei Province, it has spread quickly nationwide (Zhi, 2020) and in other countries of the world. After WHO declared COVID 19 epidemic a public health emergency of International concern on the 30th of January 2020, Africa reported its first case in Egypt on February 14, 2020 (Gilbert et al., 2020). WHO reported that as at 29 March 2020, 634,835 positive cases of COVID 19 were recorded, a figure which is five times more than that reported on the 11th of March 2020, within a period of just eighteen days 61,159 deaths were reported worldwide. In the Western Pacific region of the world China is leading with 82,356 cases. In the region of America, United States of America is leading with 103,321 confirmed cases. In the Eastern Mediterranean region, Iran has the highest number of confirmed cases (35,408). In the European region, Italy is the most affected country with 92,472 cases and 10,023 deaths recorded. In the African region South Africa is the most affected with 1,187 confirmed cases. Three other countries, that is, neighbouring Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique have also reported COVID 19 cases.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research was premised on the following research questions:

- What social coping mechanisms did Zimbabweans employ during the 21-Day COVID 19 lockdown period?

- Are there any psychological coping mechanisms that people found useful during the lockdown?
- What physical strategies did people turn to during the involuntary lockdown?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In China where the pandemic originated from, identified cases were immediately isolated in designated wards in existing hospitals. Two new hospitals were built to isolate and treat patients who tested positive in Wuhan and Hubei. People who were exposed to COVID 19 by being in contact with cases were asked to self-quarantine at home or were taken to special quarantine facilities where they would be monitored for onset of symptoms. These measures were, however, not enough to slow down the spread of COVID 19. China had no choice but to go into a total lock down. This disrupted the lives of the people as they could no longer do the things they would routinely do as they were all forced to be in their homes. Life was not easy for the millions of residents who found themselves trapped in an unprecedented lockdown in Wuhan, the epicenter of China's deadly COVID 19 outbreak. Some were, however, trying to make the best of a difficult situation. Many posted videos of the different things one could do in their living room on Weibo which is China's equivalent of Twitter, attracting 230 million views. These Videos showed people coming up with different kinds of activities to pass time, for example, playing ping pong on the dining table, playing badminton with a rope tied between the television and a closet, as well as individuals pretending to fish in fish tanks (Gan, 2020). Others were however taking a sedentary approach as they spent a lot of their time sleeping and eating. The people quickly adapted to what had become their new way of life. According to Kologrivaya and Shleifer (2020), school going children continued their schooling online. Even before the lockdown, China's online education system was doing very well with impressive broadband, fibre and internet coverage in many remote areas. Some Chinese citizens found they coped better when they shared their experiences of the lockdown with the rest of the world through different social media platforms. Many recommended that the best way to cope was to stay away from social media posts on the COVID 19 and only get information from reliable sources. Social media was awash with misleading information that caused a lot of fear and anxiety (Gan, 2020). Some coped by video blogging as they chronicled their everyday experiences under lockdown on video and sharing the videos with the outside world. Chen (2020) points out that people would take videos of themselves walking to the supermarket as well as birds singing outside windows and reminding people that the lockdown was not permanent and would come to pass. Others kept public diaries of their daily experiences under lockdown. Some made light of the situation by making memes that made fun of the lack of medical masks used to prevent the spread of the illness

by posting alternative protective gear as videos and pictures showed people using bras, sanitary pads as well as fruit to protect their faces from the virus (Perper, 2020).

Families took advantage of this downtime to bond with each other. Couples started reconnecting with each other; children and their parents also reconnected. According to Liao (2020), families kept themselves occupied by playing a lot of online games, watching television, listening to music as well as self-reflection, (Yau, 2020). The psychological benefits of music can be powerful and wide ranging and include but not limited to, relieving stress and anxiety (Nasim, 2015). A lot of expatriates in Wuhan were constantly worried about their loved ones as they could not be with them. This resulted in the Social Work Service Center in Nanning, Guangxi together with volunteers starting an online support group which helped disseminate information on COVID 19 as well as to provide emotional support to those that needed it (Huang, 2020).

Exercise is another coping mechanism that some people had also adopted. Many had mastered a lot of indoor workouts like yoga, skipping and aerobics that they could enjoy alone or together with the family. Gulam (2016) asserts that exercise not only improved one's body image but helped improve mood and reduce stress as well as improved ability to cope with stress.

According to WHO (2020), Europe was not spared from this global pandemic with Italy being the hardest hit having 105,792 confirmed cases as at 1 April 2020 followed closely by Spain with 102,136 confirmed cases as at the same date. These two countries have also had the highest global mortality rates from COVID-19 of 12,428 and 9,053 respectively. Acheson (2020) points out that, despite the high numbers of recorded infections in Spain, the citizens remained united and continued to encourage each other on a day to day basis. Some neighbours had taken it upon themselves to encourage others by hanging out handmade banners with messages such as 'it will be ok' amongst others. There were also collective actions such as the cheering and encouraging one another as well as health workers by going out onto their balconies at designated times during the night. On one such incident, citizens ended up singing the national anthem continuously for more than 10 minutes (Acheson, 2020). Many also took the time to exercise in their homes.

As a predominately Catholic country, Italy had resorted to social media to celebrate Mass during which intercession prayers were said for the COVID 19 pandemic. This practice had been adopted globally by the various Christian denominations as a way of giving hope to a seemingly hopeless situation. According to Piana and Bordoni (2020), a lot of people had started online prayer groups that came together at a particular time to pray for the country and the world at large. Some Catholic nuns visited and prayed for the sick at the hospitals, shared inspirational bible verses and prayed the rosary which helped everyone have a positive outlook whilst supporting each other during the lockdown (Piana and

Bordoni, 2020). Prayer, for a lot of people helped bring a sense of hope knowing that there was a higher power that was in control.

In the United Kingdom, Matt Hancock, the UK Secretary for Health and Social Care highlighted the mainstay of the government's approach being to contain, delay, research and mitigate the virus. During the assessment phase the strategy emphasizes the need to actively find, test, isolate and treat cases (Watkins, 2020). As the virus continued to spread, the UK went on lock down. Many lost their loved ones and tried to cope alone as their normal grieving process was disrupted by the virus. Women who had lost their husbands came together and formed WhatsApp groups where members exchanged messages throughout the day, just checking in on each other, giving each other advice, sharing jokes to break the day up with a little bit of humor (Shepka and England, 2020). Some of the widows set up a virtual pub they called 'the widows' arms', where they meet to drink as well as to hold quizzes (Shepka, and England, 2020). Social media platforms have helped people keep in touch with their loved ones without having to leave their homes. (Baruah, 2012). Shepka, and England (2020) reported that some used this down time to do quite a bit of cleaning, maintenance work around the house and changing things around. These were activities that a lot of people had been putting off for a long time since they would be busy with work and other daily activities that would take them out of the house. Others took this time out to try new recipes for the family as well as doing a bit of baking.

In Africa, South Africa had been the hardest hit country with 1353 confirmed cases and 5 deaths as at 1 April 2020. It was followed by Algeria which had 716 confirmed cases and 44 deaths. Zimbabwe had recorded 9 cases and 1 death as at the same date. Rwanda Government started distributing food door to door to its citizens in a bid to help them cope during the lockdown. In Cape Town, South Africa, as in Spain, citizens would go out onto their balconies giving thanks to the doctors, nurses and other volunteers who were in the front line of the COVID 19 fight (Stone, 2020). According to Cohen (2020), as the lockdown in SA did not allow anyone to go outside to exercise or walk their dogs, citizens had taken it upon themselves to work out at home with their pets. Many have taken to prayer to try and cope with the lockdown. Those who are able to work from home were able to keep themselves occupied with work. Many families had taken this time to bond and reflect on their relationships through board games and watching movies and series together.

Zimbabwe declared a lockdown starting on the 30th of March 2020 as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID 19. This lockdown meant that people were generally expected to stay at home as all non-essential businesses were ordered to close. Zimbabwe's economy is largely informal, meaning that majority people in the country depend on self-employment activities to survive (Nyanga et al, 2013). The lockdown means that the opportunity to generate income is completely closed. This then presents a unique situation in that the psycho-social burdens of the lockdown will be compounded by genuine

economic difficulties. This study therefore seeks to explore the coping strategies adopted by Zimbabweans in this uniquely difficult period.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers adopted a qualitative approach. According to Gray (2014), qualitative research is a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena within their context-specific settings. The approach was essential to the current research as it focused on the specific psycho-social coping mechanisms that Zimbabweans engaged in during a novel situation they found themselves in during a 21-day lockdown period declared by the President. Creswell (2009) defines qualitative research as a means of exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Corbin (2008) states that it is a process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge.

The study adopted document analysis as the preferred research design. Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as a form of qualitative research whereby researchers interpret documents both printed and online, to give voice and meaning regarding an assessment topic. Document analysis was appropriate for the current research since it requires data selection instead of data collection as participants to the study were not physically accessible due to the 21-day lockdown in the country. Data was collected through WhatsApp chats until data saturation was reached at 40 respondents.

The researchers selected data from WhatsApp messages and status updates that Zimbabwean citizens posted during the 21-day lockdown period. Analysis of data for the current research involved re-reading documents including coding and category construction as well as identifying emerging themes relevant to the research question. Thematic analysis was then used to analyse the data. The data was presented using narratives.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of results is based on the research objectives, which are used as subheadings.

5.1. Social copying mechanisms

This study revealed that the majority of people, 24 (60%), resorted to WhatsApp groups to maintain contact with family and friends and enhance social relationships in the absence of physical contact. One post showed that the respondent actively participated in social discussions with his former school mates through a WhatsApp group during the lockdown as a way of keeping in touch with people outside his immediate family as shown in his post “... *keeping in touch with the old Marburians Class of 94/95 on*

WhatsApp of course". Another post indicated that the respondent took scheduled time to connect with workmates on whatsapp .*"... be blessed. Im signing off now. I've done my WhatsApp engagement for the week with my work collegeues."* Yet another had this to say.*" despite the recent increase in data tariffs, I have to find the money to connect with my friends on WhatsApp just to keep me sane during this lockdown"*. These findings are similar to findings from the United Kingdom by Shepka, and England (2020), who noted that women who had lost their husbands came together and formed WhatsApp groups where members exchanged messages throughout the day, just checking in on each other, giving each other advice, sharing jokes to break the day up with a little bit of humor. Huang (2020) also observed the same result in Wuhan where a lot of expatriates were constantly worried about their loved ones as they could not be with them. With the assistance of the Social Work Service Center in Nanning, Guangxi together with volunteers they started an online support group which helped disseminate information on COVID 19 as well as to provide emotional support to those that needed it.

The study also revealed that others, 18 (45%), played games, watched movies and spent time with their families giving them a rare opportunity to bond together which they could not previously do due to their hectic work and school schedules. One posts stated that *"busy kutamba maplaying cards nevapfanha but pakaipa kkk"* (*I have been busy playing card games with the little ones but hey, its tough kkk*). It is easy to see how in a short time people have had their lifestyles changed and now have time on their hands to do things that they would normally not engage in. One of the post read as follows: *"hubby and I have been selecting a movie to watch on the laptop alone when we go to bed, something we havent done in a long time"*. It is also evident that people engaged in fun activities to pass time during the lockdown with some even finding ways to keep entertained by themselves as shown in one of the posts which simply stated that, *"I stay by myself so because of this lockdown I have had the chance to search the internet for games and participating in them as well as a lot of crossword puzzles"*. This was supported by Liao (2020), Yau (2020) who found out that in China used the down time to bond through playing a lot of online games, watching television, listening to music as well as self-reflection.

Results of the study showed that, 11 (27.5%), of the respondents used social media platforms such as WhatsApp, twitter, zoom to stay connected to their family and friends during the lockdown. This was revealed by WhatsApp status posts in which people would post dishes made on the day such as lunch, dinner, their photos with inscriptions which included such words as *"lockdown settings"*, or *"about today"* *"#lockdownday3"*. Some even engaged in games which prompted all those who would have viewed their status update to make a comment and this would be viewed by their contacts as well and the game will be transferred to their contacts who will also transfer it to their contact and it will go on and on like that. This is collaborated by Chen (2020) who reported that some Chinese citizens found they coped better when they shared their experiences of the lockdown with the rest of the world through different social

media platforms by taking videos of themselves walking to the supermarket, posting their public diaries of their daily experiences under the lockdown, posting memes as well as updating their WhatsApp statuses.

Evidence from the study also showed that, 5 (12.5%), of the people found it difficult to be away from their workmates as revealed in one WhatsApp post:

“for me one thing I have learnt from working from home is the importance of social support especially in work settings. Having physical support can go a long way. It’s somewhat a cultural shock when you are used to seeing certain individuals physically everyday now you are forced to see them via social media. Pray we don’t go mad”.

To keep up with work and school life during the lockdown, the study revealed that some people continued working and learning from home using online platforms such as google classroom and zoom.

“I am making the most of my virtual office/utilising social media...zoom skype etc), online trading, looking at sustainable ways to improve nutrition for family in urban areas e.g. aquaponics...”. Another work-related post read as follows:

“... I’m using the time to upskill our staff using free courses that are available online. We purchased airtime for our staff so that they can continue to reach out to our beneficiaries and stakeholders for smooth transition after the lockdown”. Similarly, some school children also coped during the lockdown by catching up with their school work. Some students had Google Classroom platforms where they kept abreast with their school work. One University student posted the following response: *“I’m grateful for the lockdown ironically because it gives me time to write and complete my thesis”* another response from a mother of a 15 year old stated that *“My daughter has google classroom, she reads books, watches TV but I’m seeing signs of being cranky here and there”.* This is similar to what was observed in China by Kologrivaya and Shleifer (2020) who point out that school going children continued their schooling online during the lockdown.

5.2. Psychological Copying mechanisms

Findings revealed 8 (20%) felt that social media news on the pandemic was too much for them to handle so they chose to turn off from any news regarding COVID 19 as a coping mechanism. One of the WhatsApp posts stated that:

“I’m coping by not watching news or entertaining scary messages about the COVID 19”.

Still two others also stated that:

“I have been trying not to listen to what the social media is sending because there has been a lot of falsehood which was instilling fear and panic in me”.

"I'm trying by all means to stay away from negative posts about the pandemic and other negative posts in general I'm just trying to stay positive".

The same observation were noted in China by Gan (2020) who states that many recommended that the best way to cope was to stay away from social media posts on the COVID 19 and only get information from reliable sources as social media was awash with misleading information that caused a lot of fear and anxiety.

The study also revealed 16 (40%) of the respondents listened to music to soothe their anxieties during the lockdown. This was revealed by some of the posts below:

"Listening to the radio, playing music, singing along and dancing".

and

"I'm finding my comfort and solace in listening to music, I have a wide collection ".

This is supported by Nasim (2015) who also asserts that the psychological benefits of music can be powerful and wide ranging and include but not limited to, relieving stress and anxiety that could be caused by the lockdown.

5.3. Religious Coping Mechanisms

The study revealed 31 (77.5%) of the people turned to prayer, bible reading and christian devotionals as coping mechanism during the lockdown. In the absence of a vaccine and no known cure for COVID19, it is expected that people will easily turn to a higher power than themselves as a way of finding hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. The responses showed that people turned to God during the lockdown as evidenced by some of the Whatsapp posts that were analysed such as: *"im taking this time to pray, meditate and reflect on myself"* or *"...I pray constantly. I have daily Christian devotions that are targeted for times such as these"*. Other attendended online church services or sought audio and visual christain materials that they could listen to and watch to draw spiritual inspiration from during the lockdown as attested by one post which stated that: *"we are coping by listening to religious audios sent to us as well as praying for our family and zimbabwe as a whole".* Also another one posted that: *"an important part is just constant update on christian platforms or social networks which have been useful in giving hope and encouragement"*. These findings are confirmed by results from Italy, which is also predominantly Catholic, where Piana and Bordoni (2020) observed that a lot of people had started online prayer groups that came together at a particular time to pray for the country and the world at large and that Catholic nuns prayed for the sick at the hospitals, shared inspirational bible verses and prayed the rosary for people.

5.4. Physical Coping Strategies

The study revealed that the majority of people 36 (90%) resorted to physical copying mechanism such as indoor housework which included cleaning the house, gardening, doing laundry, cooking meals for their families, and packing things away and putting their living spaces in order.

“I also love gardening so I pop outside and tinker with my flowers. Very relaxing and therapeutic”. It is evident that while some will do gardening for the love of it, some will do it as a way of filling up the extra time that they find themselves with as seen in one post that said *“I have doing gardening including weeding the whole yard just to pass the time”*. Others resorted to doing any sort of work around the house. One response stated that *“...packing and unpacking in rooms, gardening, mending torn clothes and shoes”*. Another response also indicted that people when to great lengths to occupy themselves during the lockdown as a way of utilising the additional time at their disposal as confirmed by another post which simply said *“...right now I’m going to get rid of garbage iri pamusoro pechirugu”(right now I going to get rid of the garbage that is on top of my chicken run)*. Similar findings were observed in the United Kingdom where according to Shepka and England (2020) people reported using the lockdown period to do a bit of cleaning, maintenance work around the house and changing things around.

WhatsApp posts showed that 15 (37.5%) of the people resorted to daily exercise routines like jogging, indoor aerobics as well as brisk walking around their homes and neighbourhoods as a copying mechanism during the lockdown. One whatsapp response simply read *“exercising”* another responded on being asked how they are coping with the lockdown sent a video of herself and husband in gym outfits doing exercises in their living room. Another respondent stated that *“Hubby goes jogging and I will join him on some days not all... since Saturday he has been taking the girls for exercises in the yard”*. One post also stated that *“...exercising, sit ups, jumping jacks, etc”*. It is very possible that people who had a fitness routine before the lockdown went to great lengths to find alternative ways to keep their bodies in shape during the lockdown through alternative fitness methods such as jogging, indoor exercises and even walks within their yards which could be a far cry from the fully furnished gyms that they were accustomed to. Similar findings were recorded in South Africa by Cohen (2020) who revealed that citizens of the country were not allowed to leave their homes during the lockdown therefore resorted to work out at home with their pets. Gulam (2016) also asserts that exercise not only improves one’s body image but helped improve mood and reduce stress as well as improved ability to cope with stress in the event of a lockdown, stress associated with being incapacitated to live your normal life.

The study revealed that 6 (15%) of the people turned to sleeping during the lockdown as a coping mechanism. This could have been due to lack of better things to pass time with or making up for lost

time during their hectic schedule. Some of the comments stated that: *"I have been sleeping, eating and sitting outside, it makes me feel at peace"*. Another one noted that *"My husband has been sleeping a lot"* Gan (2020) observed similar findings in China where some people decided to take a sedentary approach to the lockdown and opted to spend their time sleeping and eating.

6. CONCLUSION

The research revealed that people used different social, psychological, religious and physical coping strategies during the lockdown in an effort to try and have a life that closely resembled their normal daily routines without the physical contact with the outside world. Some of the people took the lockdown to be a positive thing and made the most of the additional time they had and utilised the opportunity to bond with their families by engaging in activities they could not perform as families under normal circumstances such as cooking together, playing games with their children, watching movies and jogging and exercising as families and spouses. They found means to connect with friends and family outside their immediate family to maintain the social relationships during the lockdown. Others also saw this as a blessing in disguise and welcomed the additional time at their hands to catchup on their school work, work on their dissertations or simply read books of interests as well as write work reports. Some people on the other hand had no idea how to handle the time at their disposal and decided to sleep, eat and take a laid-back stance on the lockdown.

Zimbabwe being a Christian community also meant that people had different understanding and interpretation to COVID19 including its aetiology and cure. This could also explain why some people turned to devoting the time to connecting with God through prayer, bible reading, and Christian devotionals as individuals and collectively through social networks groups, online devotional and live sermons and meetings held through various online channels. Other people were also not comfortable with the flow of information about COVID19 on social media with some posts being very negative and fatalistic that they decided to switch off from any news regarding the pandemic so as to guard themselves from anxiety and fear during the lockdown.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings gathered from this study, the following recommendations are therefore proffered.

- Government should come up with a detailed plan of action to support individuals and families before, during and after a lockdown as this period can change peoples' lives forever.
- There is need for an official national mouthpiece for information dissemination in future where people can turn to for authentic and credible information.

- Zimbabweans should follow government regulations in order to curb the spread of COVID 19 and similar pandemics in future.

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