

## Examining the Differences in Psychological Wellbeing of Turkish Immigrants in Germany Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparative Study

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### Abstract

*Migrants are considered a vulnerable group during the COVID-19 outbreak due to low socio-economic status, discrimination, and language difficulties. Thus, they have experienced increased rates of anxiety and depression during the pandemic (Xiang et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). The participants of this research were mainly first and second-generation Turkish immigrants. They were pre-screened for a previous history of mental disorders and screening was performed with SCL-90-R. Of all 177 participants who completed the questionnaire between October 7, 2019, and February 2020, they were recruited again between August 10, 2020, and December 10, 2020, during the pandemic. According to the findings, a significant difference was found for depression ( $t=-5.36, p<.001$ ), anxiety ( $t=-3.01, p<.001$ ), and hostility ( $t=-3.70, p<.001$ ) between the mean scores of the participants before and during COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that the increase in depression and anxiety symptoms during the coronavirus pandemic was higher among participants with low-income levels ( $p<.001$ ). The mental health of our study participants worsened during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Turkish immigrants reported having higher depression, anxiety, and hostility scores in comparison with previous test scores conducted before the outbreak. Participants with low income were at the highest risk for COVID-19-related depression and anxiety.*

**Keywords:** depression; anxiety; Turkish immigrants; COVID-19

### Introduction

Previous pandemics and epidemics such as plague, AIDS, SARS, and H1N1 caused a crisis and affected the whole world. The most recent example of these outbreaks is the coronavirus (COVID-19) that broke out in China and still causes many deaths worldwide, negatively affecting individuals psychologically and economically. Notably, the pandemic's impact is not limited to mortality but also affects people mentally. For example, a study conducted in Germany reported that participants with depression and anxiety diagnoses increased in April 2020–December 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 (anxiety: + 9%, depression: + 12%) (Kostev et al., 2021). It was stated in other studies that the prevalence of anxiety, depression, and anger increased among the general German population throughout the pandemic (Beutel et al., 2021; Rossi et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021). Besides, there has been an increase in mental problems among individuals with psychiatric disorders and the immigrant population in society. Migrants are considered vulnerable during the outbreak due to low socio-economic status, job losses, and language difficulties. Thus, they have experienced increased rates of anxiety and depression during the pandemic (Xiang et al., 2020;

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OECD, 2020). According to findings of a recent study, unemployed Turkish immigrant patients with low income worried more during the pandemic (Cindik-Herbrüggen et al., 2021). Thus, previous studies conducted after the coronavirus outbreak demonstrated that the uncertain nature of the pandemic increased anxiety and depression. Although during the early stages of the pandemic, several studies are conducted on the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on mental health, the psychological effects of the current outbreak on immigrants in society have been addressed in very few studies.

Considering the devastating impact of the pandemic on public health services, economies, restrictions, and lockdowns, we expect that the mental health of Turkish immigrants differs before and during the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate changes in the psychological health of Turkish immigrants living in Germany before and during COVID-19 outbreak. Furthermore, socio-demographic differences were analysed in the study. Individuals with lower incomes are more likely to suffer from mental health problems.

## **Methods and objectives**

### **Study sample**

Turkish immigrant patients treated at the Neuro-Psychiatrisches Zentrum Riem (hence NPZR) were selected as study participants. The participants of this research were mainly first and second-generation Turkish immigrants. A total of 117 participants (54 male, 46.2%, and 63 females, 53.8%) were recruited. The NPZR offers neurological, psychosomatic, psychiatric, and psychotherapeutic therapy in ten different languages. Applied culture-specific therapies consist of mother tongue therapies for Turkish patients, stress management, emotion regulation, and several migration-specific topics such as homesickness, discrimination, fear of cultural assimilation, the disease concept, and psychosomatic symptoms.

### **Data collection tools**

The participants were provided with a socio-demographic form, the Turkish version of The Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90 R).

### **Information form**

The Personal Information Form was developed by researchers to obtain information about the participants' age, gender, education level, marital and employment status.

### **The Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90 R)**

The Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90 R) questionnaire was developed to assess psychological symptoms and distress (Derogatis et al., 2010). The validity and reliability of the Turkish version of the SCL-90-R was performed and approved by Kilic (1991). The instrument includes 90 items constituting 10 subscales: somatization, obsessive-compulsiveness, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, and psychoticism. The reliability scores of the Turkish version of the SCL-90-R's subscales ranged from .65 to .84 (Kilic, 1991).



## Data Collection

The participants were pre-screened for a previous history of mental disorders and screening was performed with SCL-90-R. In addition, the previous data was collected between October 7, 2019, and February 2020 which was before the COVID-19 pandemic. Of all 177 participants who completed the questionnaire before, they were recruited again between August 10, 2020, and December 10, 2020, during the pandemic. Filling out the questionnaire took about twenty minutes. The patients were assured that their personal data collected in the course of the study would be handled anonymously. After the informative discussion, the patients received information on the study and were given written consent to participate in the study. The Ethics Committee of the Bavarian State Medical Association has confirmed that no ethical approval is required. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## Data Analysis

The IBM SPSS Statistics software was used to evaluate the collected data. The data is checked for incorrect and missing values as well as outliers or other abnormalities. Paired Samples t-test was performed in the analysis of the comparison of participants' pre-COVID-19 psychological symptom scores and post-psychological symptom scores. ANOVA test was used for sample groups formed according to income groups in the analysis of the comparison of the mean score differences of psychological symptoms before and after the coronavirus.

## Results

**Table 1.** Participants' demographic characteristics

N: 117	n	%	
Gender	Female	63	53.8
	Male	54	46.2
Education	Primary/Secondary School	91	77.8
	High School	25	21.4
	Bachelor	1	.9
Marital Status	Married	93	79.5
	Single	1	.9
	Divorced/Widow	23	19.7
Income	Low	67	57.3
	Average	46	39.3
	High	4	3.4
Employment Status	Employed	47	40.2
	Unemployed	70	59.8

## Description of the sample

A total of 117 participants, all of whom were first- and second-generation Turkish immigrants, took part in our study and responded to the questionnaire. Among the sample of participants, 46.2% were male (n=54) and 53.8% were female (n=63). Of the participants, 73.5 % (n=93) were married, 10.7% (n=23) were divorced or widowed. The majority of participants (n=91;77.8%) were primary and secondary school graduates, followed by high school

graduates ( $n=25;21.4\%$ ). While the rate of employed participants was  $40.2\%$  ( $n=47$ ), the percentage of unemployed participants was  $59.8\%$  ( $n=70$ ).

Participants were asked to answer each question of SCL-90-R considering their situation before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic. According to the findings, a significant difference was found between depression ( $t=-5.36, p<.001$ ), anxiety ( $t=-3.01, p<.001$ ), and hostility ( $t=-3.70, p<.001$ ) variables and the mean scores of the participants before and during COVID-19 pandemic was represented in *Table 2*.

**Table 2.** Comparison of psychological symptom scores before and during the COVID-19

Variables	Before COVID-19		During COVID-19		Mean Difference		t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Depression	2.19	.81	2.59	.83	-.40	.80	-5.36
Anxiety	1.98	.91	2.23	.87	-.24	.89	-3.01
Hostility	1.65	.79	1.93	.93	-.27	.81	-3.70

**Table 3.** Comparison of psychological symptom scores before and during coronavirus in terms of income

Income	Low Income		Average		High Income		Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Depression	2.67	.75	2.56	.92	1.58	.73	.36
Anxiety	1.98	.91	2.23	.87	-.24	.89	.07
$p < .005$							

The differences between pre-coronavirus symptom scores and during-coronavirus symptom scores were compared according to different income level groups and it was found that the increase in depression and anxiety symptoms during the coronavirus pandemic was higher among participants with low-income levels ( $p<.001$ ).

## Discussion

The current study was designed to investigate whether there was a difference between the mental health of Turkish immigrants before and during the coronavirus outbreak in Germany, and to determine the relationship between sociodemographic and the psychological health of participants.

The findings of this paper can contribute to the literature that depression, anxiety, and hostility increased among Turkish immigrants during the pandemic. The current crisis affected Turkish immigrants with pre-existing psychiatric disorders in two different ways. First, the pandemic itself might worsen mental disorders owing to uncertainties and a stressful environment in society. Stress can lead to the development and exacerbation of symptoms of mental health disorders. Second, social distancing in the context of COVID-19 included maintaining a two-metres distance and avoiding social relationships with family and friends. In addition to the social restrictions imposed due to COVID-19, immigrants with pre-existing psychiatric disorders began to feel that their health worsened due to interrupted healthcare systems, reduced social circles, and language difficulties. Restrictions such as advising people to avoid



non-essential travel and unnecessary visits to relatives and friends were likely to lead to further loneliness, isolation, and frustration. Considering collectivist cultures which underline the significance of togetherness and group needs over individual attitudes, the mental health of Turkish immigrants was negatively affected. In addition, it is important for immigrants who experienced discrimination during the pandemic to receive support from their relatives and professionals. The results of our previous research revealed that perceived individual discrimination was significantly related to having friends and personal support (Cindik-Herbrüggen et al., 2021). As a result of travel restrictions, immigrants could not visit their friends and relatives. Assuming that our participants perceived discrimination and could not receive support from their friends or relatives during the pandemic, their mental health were negatively affected.

The findings of previous studies, which were conducted with immigrants during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrated consistent results. Immigrant participants were reported to have higher depression, anxiety, and hostility scores throughout the pandemic outbreak (Kieseppä et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2021). Similarly, Alt et al. (2021) illustrated in their research that depressive symptoms and negative mood increased during the pandemic among the native German population and first- or second-generation immigrants.

One of the most destructive impacts of the pandemic is that individuals with low- and middle-income were affected more and they reported more mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and more anger (Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2021). In Germany during the early stages of the pandemic Kurzarbeit (short working hours) was implemented and particularly immigrant groups with low-income status had a higher rate of “short-time work” (Grunau, Steffes, & Wolter, 2020). This consequently led to stress and exacerbation of mental health problems. The findings of our paper support the results of previous research. Our study illustrated that the depression and anxiety scores were higher among Turkish immigrants with low incomes.

## **Conclusion**

The mental health of our study participants worsened during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Turkish immigrants reported to have higher depression, anxiety, and hostility scores in comparison with previous test scores conducted before the outbreak. Participants with low income were at the highest risk for COVID-19-related depression and anxiety. Socio-economically disadvantaged populations had more difficulties during the pandemic and required intensive psychological health care. Therefore, further investigation and observation of the psychological health parameters of immigrants throughout the pandemic and post-pandemic are essential to comprehend the long-term impacts of the pandemic.

## **Study limitations**

Our study population showed that the mental health of Turkish immigrants differed before and during the COVID-19 outbreak, in line with our hypotheses. The sample size of our research was limited only to Turkish immigrant patients with existing mental disorders who were treated at the NPZR, thus the results can only be applied with caution to the general population and should be carefully interpreted.

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