



Establishing the Global Feelings of People Who Sought Online Support Throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic

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KEYWORDS

self isolation,
onlinesupport.

ABSTRACT

When the Irish self isolation support group became busy on Facebook throughout the Covid-19 pandemic it attracted over two thousand people who sought support from over 100 other countries. As a result of the group being created and led from Ireland the leaders decided to welcome all people from around the world who were not only seeking positive support within the group but who expressed their views about the happenings throughout the pandemic also. From then the group was renamed the International self isolation support group. Consequently, the group population grew from 3,342 members to 5, 558 members by late 2021. That meant that there were an extra 2,216 members from over 100 different countries outside of Ireland who were researched about their feelings about living through the pandemic. This paper establishes the global feelings of people from all countries other than Ireland who sought online support within the group throughout the covid-19 pandemic. By learning the opinions and feelings of people who sought support from all around the world at this time the researcher was able to discover what global support will be required by people internationally when unpredicted pandemics spread throughout the world. The results of this research within the International self isolation support group showed that people wished to be around more people in real life and wanted to support people during Christmas 2020 when many were alone for Christmas for their first time. It also became clear that people were nervous to be around public houses at times but wanted to have a real-life party at a time when the virus would not be considered harmful to them and others. There was evidence of anxiety and depression and feelings of being dictated to by various governments too.

1. Introduction

Throughout the early months of 2020 as the world became aware of the existence of Covid-19 a lot of anxiety appeared in people (Laato, Islam, Islam, & Whelan, 2020). Although not everyone believed that there was a pandemic they knew that ordinary life had changed and there were adaptations required by all (Van Stekelenburg, et al; 2021). As governments around the world tried various approaches from herd immunity to strict lockdowns there was a lessening of public gatherings and instead, people spent lots of time at home and away from friends and family (Orlowski & Goldsmith, 2020). From there technological companies increased their labour forces as it became clear that more users of many online services and social media platforms began to arise. It became evident that despite many people staying away from people in real life they wanted to connect with others online.

The Irish self isolation support group had been created on March 12th, 2020 and it had grown to 3,442 members from 32 different counties in Ireland within the first couple of months. From there more growth in the group took place. The increase of the group then spread internationally across over 100 different countries and almost all of the continents of the world. From the United States 1, 170 members joined and 275 members came from the United Kingdom. The Philippines was the next most popular country represented in the group with 71 people and Canada followed closely behind with 55 members. Australia had 50 members and India had 29 members in the group. Spain had 17 members, followed closely by New Zealand with 16, and finally, Sri Lanka had 15 members also. Many other countries had a handful of members each.

Within 3 months the international members of the group were highly diversified in class, race, religion, culture, gender, and age group. The overall group (including both the Irish and international members) age ranged from 18 to 65 years and over where 77% of the members identified as female and 23% identified as male.

Although the group was initially titled the 'Irish self isolation support' group on Facebook the group creator then felt it was better to change the name to the 'International self isolation support' group. However, this proved difficult to do as Facebook has a policy permitting group creators from changing the name of a group to a different name after there are 5,000 or more members join (Facebook, 2023). Therefore, it was impossible to provide a more inclusive name to best reflect the international members within the group. Still, the group creator

made it known to all group members and anyone who wished to join the group in the future that the group ethos would now come under the remit of it being an international support group. It also renamed in the group information section as being an international group. By posting on the group description that the group was originally known as the 'Irish self isolation support' group, he stated that it was an online space of social support for anyone interested, worried, or seeking support whilst thinking about or being forced to self-isolate due to coming into contact with Covid-19 (Corona Virus) and from anywhere in the world.

He also spoke about the 'céad míle fáilte' (hundred thousand welcomes) that Ireland was famous for and stated that the group's international appeal first occurred in the summer of 2020. By the time the group had become open to everyone around the world, there were four group moderators who all resided in Galway, Ireland. Moderators were competent professionals in their own right and were used to managing people in real life and online and were trusted by the group creator before 2020.

2. Material and Methods:

For the author to establish the global feelings of people who sought online support throughout the covid-19 pandemic he first had to distinguish within the group who was not from the island of Ireland. As the group originated within Ireland and most of the people who joined the group in the first couple of months of the pandemic were Facebook friends of the original members who had come to the group it became clear to the researcher that they would have to devise a strategy to segregate the data of those from Ireland from those from outside of Ireland who were also members of the same online group. He also needed to figure out the best way to engage people from other countries within the group and to provide positive support for all international members of the group, especially given that his first obligation within the group was to provide positive support to all of its members.

Within a couple of weeks of there being a diverse range of new members joining the group from overseas it became clear to the researcher that international members were happy to engage in posts from Irish residents within the group. It became clear also that many of the topics being discussed in Ireland within the group were of interest to those from other countries too. This proved to be popular topics of conversation for all group members as well as all members sharing the best ways of living with Covid-19 in their countries and learning from how Irish people were dealing with the disease on a day-to-day basis.

With that in mind, the group researcher created a series of surveys within the group. Although he posted all of the surveys within the group where both Irish and international members could vote and comment on the questions he analysed the data by using the Facebook tools and statistics to separate Irish voters and comments from international voters and comments. In this way, he could count the number of international members and group their feedback for this specific group set.

The surveys that the author used were multiple-choice questions. Respondents to the surveys could choose to avoid voting in the survey, comment on the survey's question or they could vote and comment if they wished to also. Furthermore, they could avoid voting and commenting and only 'like' or share any specific survey question to their friends' list on Facebook also. By using the Facebook tools the author could slowly click on voters' profiles and see their country of residence and from there compile the data from international members of the group only, while skipping the Irish responses to survey questions.

As there were already 3,442 people in the group from Ireland by the time the group attracted overseas members and as the international members who joined the group were generally interested in similar topics that the Irish members were in regular conversation about this made it easier for the researcher to devise research surveys that would be attractive to all the group members in question. It is important to note that the group moderators kept the overall group conversation strictly to issues pertaining to positive support throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. As Covid-19 was an air-borne virus (Wilson, Corbett, & Tovey, 2020) which did not distinguish between borders it seemed logical to survey all group members on the topics that were best spoken about in reputable journals and scientific papers throughout the pandemic.

The survey questions provided the researcher with both quantitative and qualitative methods to research the international members of the group. To discover the global feelings of people who sought online support throughout the Covid-19 pandemic the author queried the members on the reality that many would be spending Christmas 2020 away from friends and family. This was owing to the reality that many were staying away from visiting other people to avoid becoming infected by Covid-19 and spreading it to others in a household. He also

asked about the majority who seemed uninterested in going to public houses for the same reason. The survey also included questions regarding the members' interest in having a public party to meet other members of the support group as well as discovering the overall feelings of anxiety and depression, and having to abide by specific government restrictions in some countries also. In all, there were 10 surveys asked the international members of the group and the results were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

3. Results:

This paper concentrated on discovering the feelings of the international members of the Facebook group who sought online support during the Covid-19 pandemic. By surveying the members on their opinions about how to spend Christmas 2020 away from family and friends and being unwilling or unable to socialise in public houses with people the author could begin to understand their overall feelings throughout the pandemic. He also surveyed them on whether they felt like meeting for a party in public when the pandemic would end, their feelings of anxiety and depression, and how their governments' restrictions due to the ongoing pandemic were making them feel.

Regarding their feelings about Christmas, the international members were asked what they wanted the group leaders to do in the group at Christmas and if it would be possible to take the time in Christmas 2020 to help others out especially given that Christmas is a time for goodwill. The respondents were given three options in this survey to choose to answer. Firstly they were given the choice to do a 'massive online Christmas table quiz'.

They were also given the option to have a 'giant zoom call for members of the group' and finally a 'buddy system where you can entrust your number/ e-mail to the group leader and he (the group creator) would then forward it to lonely members of the group who would like a chat or two over Christmas'.

When the group members voted 17% (n=5) of them wanted a 'massive Christmas day quiz' and only 7% (n=2) wanted a 'giant Zoom call for members who can join with a private link'. The majority (76%, n=23) wanted 'a buddy system where you can entrust your number/ e-mail to the group leader and he would then forward it to lonely members of the group who would like a chat or two over Christmas'. There were 30 votes to this survey question.

As a result, the group leader committed to matching up people within the group to become buddies with those that required company during that Christmas. To do that the leader posted that he would confidentially trade people's information once it was sent to them via private messaging. Each person who was interested in being a buddy for others gave preferences of the type of person they required by selecting their gender, age group, and location and the author assured them he would do his best to match them up with people of that general description that required assistance.

The international members of the group were also asked their feelings on the public houses opening and if they would be interested in returning to them when they would open. Again, they were given three answers to choose from. Firstly they could choose 'I will return in the first 2 weeks.', then 'I will not return in the first 2 weeks.' And finally, 'I'm not sure.' Of those that voted 11% (n=26) chose 'I will return in the first 2 weeks.' And a further 17% (n=40) said they were not sure. The majority (70%, n=163) selected 'I will not return in the first 2 weeks'. In all, there were 233 internationals voted in this survey. Some of the comments stated that 'I will not return anytime soon' and the opposite opinion which was 'Why not return. We need to get back to normality otherwise we will be ducking and diving all our lives' and 'Be back straight away. Have to get on with living our lives. The 'fallout' from these lockdown measures could end up more damaging to our society than the virus itself.' They were more measured feedback too when one woman stated 'I think it's going to be very hard to manage...the fun and alcohol combination...no one will be watching time...how could you...and as we're only 30-40% compliant with the face masks...well, as the virus is still out there and very dangerous'.

Another person was worried about meeting their friends for coffee when they said that 'All I want is to be able to meet up with the people I usually have coffee and fun in the morning and the young ones can look after themselves'.

The respondents in the group were asked if they would like the opportunity to come to a public party with other members of the group. Even though they would have to travel to Galway, Ireland a large percentage (67, n=68) said they would go, whereas 25% (n=25) would not, and 7% (n=8) were not sure.

There were 101 respondents to this survey. Their opinions of this included people feeling as if 'it would be wonderful when everything is over, to be able to meet all', and 'I'm still in 'very nervous' mode and cannot imagine what this would be like. So many people near us are ill but hopefully, the day will come when we can relax and have fun again.' This continued with comments such as 'I get that because I'm scared too - I've been shielding because I'm an asthmatic. But I need something positive to look forward to... I grew up in county Galway and it'd be lovely to come home and meet all you lovely people. Stay safe everyone ' and several 'Definitely' responses too.

The group members were asked 'If you are suffering from feelings of anxiety or depression right now, would you be interested in trying proven psychological measures in place of anti-depressant medication?' and their responses showed that 15% (n=6) would not, 9% (n=4) may try this, and the majority (76%, n=31) would. There were 41 votes in this survey. The question was asked in a way so as not to antagonise any group member who was suffering from depression or anyone who was suffering mentally and also to give them the choice to comment on the question if they wanted to express their opinions. Comments included 'I've worked through all lockdowns but if I was at home I'd be very depressed and I feel for people that are. ', and 'when I have anxiety or depression, I pray to Jesus and he takes care of everything'.

When the virus began to spread more lethal variants to the public the members of the group were asked how this was making them feel. Only 4% (n=5) were calm, and 15% (n=18) said they were 'more worried than ever'. The majority (75%, n=90) expressed they were 'more worried than ever.' There were 120 votes for this survey question. Comments on this post ranged from 'stay calm, kind and safe. Do our part and pray that this time those who do not get wearing masks and following the rules must make life easier for everyone so must have faith!!', and 'what's with this variant in South Africa, different to Covid. The vaccine doesn't work against it... so worried today' and 'I don't feel any different because I am following the guidelines. I will look after myself and stay at home as I have been doing from day one.'

When there was a return to lockdown imposed by various international governments the respondents were surveyed and their feelings were as follows. Almost 40% (37%, n=80) were 'content as it should lower the cases', and 9% (n=19) felt 'it doesn't change the way I feel'. The majority (54%, n=117) expressed that they were 'frustrated as this is happening again'. There were 216 votes for this survey. Comments ranged from 'frustrated because so many of us did our best and continue to do our best to stop the chain of transmission. But there were people out there who put their own wants first, went abroad when they shouldn't have, and didn't isolate when they should have. Before March 15th, 2020, I led a full and active life at 71 years of age. My whole week was taken up with art classes, volunteer work with young people and just socialising with people of my own age group' and 'Yes lockdown is in some ways a "difficult time" ... however a little knowledge of European history alone from 500 AD until 1800 AD will help us realise we live in a paradise even during lockdown compared to what the slaves and serfs had to endure.' Some were even more irritated stating that stating 'I'm pissed off because the government isn't dealing with the real problem areas. The schools need to be closed to all except those who can't study from home, those with poor or nonexistent internet connections, or those who have no quiet place to study.' One person even mentioned exercising saying 'I am kept busy doing exercises to get my shoulder replacement working and trying to get myself to study for my repeat modules so I don't have time to think about Covid, shoulder pain will distract one from anything!.'

When cases were reported to have risen even when lockdowns were announced people felt more anxious than ever with 76% (n=59) saying they were 'anxious' and only 7% (n=5) saying they were 'calm'. The remaining 17% (n=13) stated they felt the same as usual. There were only 78 votes in this survey.

When asked about the return of schools to their normal hours and being open as usual respondents declared that it would make them feel more 'anxious' (58%, n=76) and 32% (n=44) stated it 'would not change their feelings' with the vast minority (7%, n=10) saying they were 'calm'. People made their feelings clear on this saying 'this is ridiculous every other workplace has social distancing people with schools they think they can put 30 in a room for 6 hours with no people and no social distancing and hope for the best.' Whereas another person opposed that view, saying 'schools need to go back for God's sake. Enough of the scaremongering. Let's get on with life before we lose our minds and before the country goes down the tubes!' and 'hand washing, temperature taking and no sharing books/supplies will all be in place. It's time to get our kids back to school.' But not all felt this way as another comment said 'All that interaction at School If a child becomes ill then what... No!'

When summer arrived and the cases of Covid-19 were still reported to be rising respondents said that 72% (n=81) were ‘more anxious’ and 7% (n=8) were ‘calm’ where as nearly a fifth

(18%, n=20) did not feel any different. There were 113 votes to this survey and the comments included that ‘as an individual, I'm conscious of the fact that I cannot influence outcomes. I will proceed en route to the new normal wherever that places me’ and ‘at this stage, I don't care because I don't know what to believe anymore!!’ and ‘believe nothing the democrats say!’.

When several governments imposed the mandatory usage of facemasks the vast majority (88%, n=150) said they ‘felt safer’. Whereas 7% (n=12) felt it was ‘overly cautious’. The remaining 2% (n=2) said it did not ‘change how they felt’. There were 170 votes for this survey. Comments stated that ‘It's safer if everyone else is wearing them. If I wear a mask I am protecting you from me. Please be equally considerate and wear one to protect me from you, regardless of whether you are symptomatic or not.’ and ‘absolutely....mandatory at all times..... it may have lessened as far as the stats go, still no answers as to what it is, many places are seeing a real surge in this pandemic, better to be safe than sorry.... it's still an ongoing virus.....’ and ‘I'll walk thanks, haven't worn one since the start and I won't start now.’ There were also comments that emphasised an opposing viewpoint with ‘I am more than happy to wear a mask, and have done because I am immune compromised.’

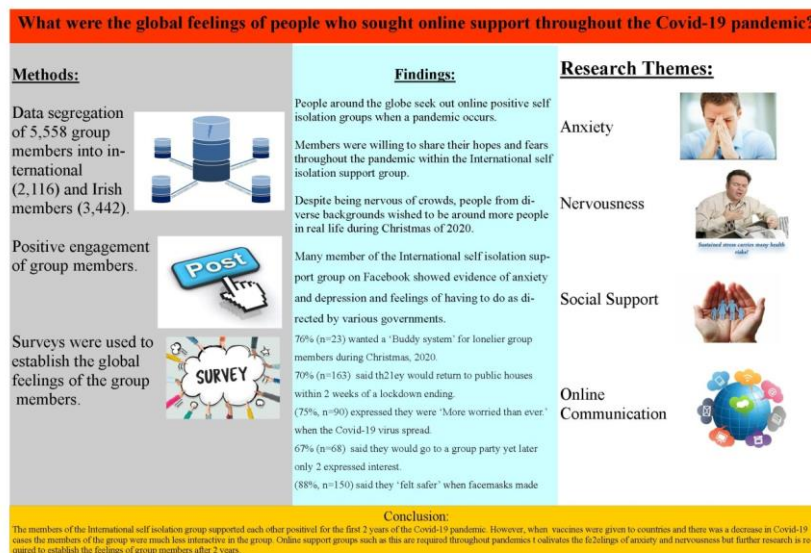


Fig. 1. The methods, findings, research themes, and conclusion of the global feelings of people who sought online support throughout the covid-19 pandemic

4. Discussion:

This paper attempted to establish the global feelings of people who sought online support throughout the covid-19 pandemic and it did so successfully throughout the first two years of the pandemic only. Notable for the author of this research was the lack of interaction within the group after February 2022. This was nearly 24 months since the group was initially created.

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine began at that time (United Nations, 2022) and also because people had news fatigue regarding the topic of Covid -19 in the media (Newman, 2022) it ushered the end of much of the interaction within the support group. Also, by this time the virus effects had gotten much milder (Adam, 2022.). So the results of this study have limitations, in that, this paper only addresses the opinions and perceptions of people from over 100 countries in the first two years of the pandemic. Also, there was not the same amount of representatives from each of the countries giving their opinions within the group.

With that said this study's outcomes showed consistency of opinion across all of the nations within the group and so it was easy for the group creator and leaders to run the group given that most of the topics were common to all members. The reason for this was that the effects of the virus had similar effects in all countries. Therefore,

the author is content that he established the global feelings of people who sought online support throughout the covid-19 pandemic.

Within this paper the opinions about how to spend Christmas 2020 away from family and friends were established, the interest of returning or not to public houses to socialise was discovered, the overall feeling of all members throughout the pandemic was gotten, the interest in travelling to Ireland (which was the home of the online group) and partake in a public group party for international members was learned, and the perceptions of the feelings of anxiety and depression were revealed. Finally, a survey on various governments' restrictions and how this made the members of the group felt was communicated within this research too.

Of the 10 surveys asked the international members of the group over three-quarters of those surveyed (76%, n=23) wanted a way of helping others who were isolated from their friends and family throughout Christmas, 2020. This showed that most of the international people in the group were considerate of other people's feelings and had empathy.

They showed they were wary about returning to public gatherings such as public houses as the majority (70%, n=163) stated they would not return within the first 2 weeks after a lockdown ended. Yet, a large percentage of international respondents were open to travelling to Ireland (67, n=68) to have a party with Irish members when it was safe to do so. This communicated to the researcher that people were eager to travel more so than go to public houses when the effects of contracting Covid-19 had become less harmful. This was proven some time later when there were record numbers of travels in 2023 (Hearst, 2023).

When asked about different treatment options if they were suffering from feelings of anxiety or depression 76% (n=31) said they would be more open to psychological measures rather than medication. This survey ensued as the mood within the group was very poor at the time with many saying they were feeling anxious or depressed. As so many comments arose after the survey and voted to admit to feeling mentally unwell it clarified to the author that many of the members felt anxious or depressed in the late months of 2020 and in the year 2021. This finding, coupled with a similar (75%, n=90) amount of people felt 'more worried than ever' about the potential spread of the virus (He, X., et al. 2021). There was a correlation between the official international updates of the virus' potential at the time and people's lack of real connection with other people which was making them feel overly anxious also.

When people had to return to lockdowns it frustrated the members of the group but at the same time, they could understand the need for it with over 90% (54%, n=117) feeling this way. As people stopped interacting with posts in the group in early 2022 it showed that their feelings of frustration wore them down and by that stage, they were sick of being contained in their lives and having to socialise online only. This finding was emphasised ever more when over three quarters (76%, n= 59) said they were 'anxious' when cases were rising during an earlier time of 2022.

A further survey which resulted in the majority feeling anxious (58%, n=76) about the return to schools and its ability to spread the virus to others put further weight on their anxiety and showed what many members were feeling in the second year of the pandemic. In the summer time, it was clear that over seven out of ten respondents were still nervous about the spread of the disease even though it was said to not be as transmissible during warmer times of the year (Mecenas, Bastos, Vallinoto & Normando, 2020).

Finally, as the highest percentage (88%, n=158) stated they 'felt safer' if their countries imposed mandatory wearing of masks for their population it showed that many people were still unprepared to return to normal public living even by stage of early 2022. In all, there were many countries who insisted on their being mandatory face masks being worn by their people (Martino-Corbishley, 2022) so the group's members' opinions were a fair reflection of what many people were feeling around the world.

5. Conclusion:

In conclusion, all of these surveys clarified the main feelings of the international members of the group which was that many sought support because they were very anxious about their lives at that time. However, by the time the group was two years old on the 12th March 2022 the international members were no longer interested in discussing this within the group. Allied with that, there was a ceasing of multiple daily requests to join the group which had been a very popular daily happening in the previous 18 months from those not in Ireland.

Although there were limitations of this research paper which were mentioned earlier there is one final limitation that must be considered for the reader. Even though the author successfully established the global feelings of people throughout the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, a more concentrated study is required to establish what level of anxiety international members felt during that period and if this level of anxiety resulted in greater feelings of well-being or not throughout 2023.

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