

## THE IMPACT OF FEAR OF THE COVID-19 VIRUS ON THE ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT OF TEACHING STAFF FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

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**Abstract:** *The COVID-19 pandemic caused major changes in the way employees in almost all areas of work performed their working tasks. This pandemic also had health and safety implications for them, causing a natural fear for their health and even their lives. The employees in the education system were not exempt. The fear of COVID-19, however, is associated with many negative impacts. One of the work-related attitudes on which the impact of fear of COVID-19 is important to examine is organisational commitment, as it has an influence on many other employees' attitudes and behaviours at the workplace and, in the end, on job performance. Since there is evidence that people differently face the fear in general, the aim of this paper is to find out whether there are differences in organisational commitment in the state of the fear of the COVID-19 pandemic among the teaching staff depending on socio-demographic variables such as gender and marital status. To realise the above objective, empirical research on a sample of 164 respondents was conducted. Descriptive statistics and a two-factor MANOVA were used to test the hypothesis. The research results showed that there is a significant effect of gender and marital status on the relationship between fear and organisational commitment among the teaching staff. These results could serve as a base for tailoring support for employees in the education system when faced*

*with challenging and threatening working conditions that may occur in the future.*

**Key words:** *COVID-19 virus, fear, organisational commitment, high school teachers.*

**JEL classification:** *H75, I1, M54*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of the coronavirus COVID-19 had a significant impact on the ways people lived, worked, connected, travelled, and did every-day activities (Kolarova, Eisenmann, Nobis, Winkler, and Lenz, 2021; OECD, 2021). The educational system was also under its strong influence. According to some researchers, „sixty-one countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and South America have announced school closures and were forced to convert to online teaching platforms“ (Nurunnabi, Almusharraf, and Aldeghaither, 2020). Besides the challenges that teaching staff faced regarding the acquisition of the new digital skills, they also experienced a greater or lesser extent of fear of this virus, which threatened their health and safety.

After the “lockdown“ that was announced in many countries was finished, the threat of the virus COVID-19 still existed for a long period of time,

and many restrictions in the public sphere were still on the line.

In order to examine the impact of fear of COVID-19 on the mental health of people, many empirical studies were conducted all around the world. In most of them, negative consequences of the fear of COVID-19 on the mental health of people were found (Nurunnabi et al., 2020).

In addition to the empirical studies that examined the influence of the fear of COVID-19 on the mental health of people, some empirical studies were aimed at investigating the influence of the fear of COVID-19 on work-related attitudes, behaviours, and performances (Abd-Ellatif, Anwar, AlJifri, and El Dalatony, 2021; Shaheen, Zulfiqar, Ahmad, and Ahmad-ur-Rehman, 2022; Sarwar, Abdullah, Imran, and Fatima, 2023). However, one of the organisational variables that did not gain sufficient attention among the authors' was organisational commitment. Yet, this variable is very important to examine in this context, as it has the potential to influence many other employees' attitudes and behaviours and, in the end, job performances (Memari, Mahdieh, and Marnani, 2013; Faloye, 2014).

Since the educational system was one of the systems that mostly suffered during the pandemic, the fear of COVID-19 and organisational commitment will be examined in the sample of high school teachers. In order to get a deeper insight into the organisational commitment in the state of fear of COVID-19, the influence of socio-demographic factors, such as gender and marital status, on the respondents will be examined. In other words, the subject of the paper is investigating the effect of gender on fear of the COVID-19 pandemic and organisational commitment, depending on the marital status of the high school teachers.

The results of the paper have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretical implications refer to filling the gap in the literature by adding new insight into the organisational commitment in the state of fear of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not been examined in the literature so far, while practical implications refer to the recommendations that will be made for policymakers regarding supporting measures for employees in the education system for effective coping with similar threats that could occur in the future.

The structure of the paper is as follows: after reviewing the literature regarding the fear of COVID-19 and organisational commitment, a

hypothesis that is going to be tested will be developed. In the methodology of research part, the context of the research, the sample, measurement scales, and statistical analysis will be explained. After this part, the results of the study and their discussion will be presented, while at the end of the paper, some concluding remarks will be made.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Fear of COVID-19

The spread of the coronavirus COVID-19 worldwide a couple of years ago caused dramatic changes in the ways people work, travel, and do their daily activities (Kolarova et al., 2021; OECD, 2021). The pandemic of this virus caused for public health care systems in most countries in the world the biggest challenge they faced ever (Filip, Gheorghita Puscaselu, Anchidin-Norocel, Dimian, and Savage, 2022). In order to cope with this challenge, many governments implemented various mechanisms, such as the quarantine measures, closeness of educational institutions, travel restrictions, social distancing, and the mandatory wearing of face masks in public places etc. (Şimşir, Koç, Seki, Griffiths, 2022).

Despite all the measures that were undertaken, most people worldwide experienced a fear of this unknown disease. This kind of fear is commonly conceptualised as an emotion experienced when individuals face the probability of a COVID-19 virus infection (Ahorsu et al., 2020). In other words, people all around the world were afraid of the possibility of being infected with this virus.

In order to examine the consequences of fear of COVID-19 on people, many empirical studies have been conducted so far. Some of these studies have focused on the impact of fear of COVID-19 on the mental health of people, while others were aimed at investigating this influence on employee attitudes and behaviour at the workplace.

In the studies that were conducted to examine the influence of fear of COVID-19 on the mental health of people, a wide range of mental health problems were identified, such as anxiety (Mahmud, Talukder, and Rahman, 2021), depression (Voitsidis et al. 2020), and insomnia (Chaturvedi, 2020; Mertens, Gerritsen, Duijndam, Salemink, and Engelhard, 2020). It was also found that as the fear of COVID-19 levels of individuals increased, their psychological symptoms also increased (Taylor et al., 2020). According to some researchers, mental health did not improve 6 months after the lockdown was finished implies that these negative consequences have a long-term impact.

In the studies that were aimed at investigating the effects of COVID-19 on work-related attitudes and behaviours, negative consequences were also found. The negative impact was found on the work engagement of employees (Shaheen et al., 2022), their job satisfaction, and turnover intentions (Abd-Ellatif et al., 2021). In addition, it was also found that fear of COVID-19 caused emotional exhaustion among employees, which in turn negatively affected their work performance (Sarwar et al., 2023).

For the purpose of measuring the fear of COVID-19, several scales were developed. One scale that has been widely used is the Fear of COVID-19 scale developed by Ahorsu et al. (2020). This scale was also used in this paper. The other scales for fear of COVID-19 measurement are the Fear of the Coronavirus Questionnaire (Mertens, Gerritsen, Duijndam, Salemink, and Engelhard, 2020), COVID Stress Scales (Taylor et al., 2020), and the single-item instrument “How would you currently rate your fear of COVID-19?” (Fitzpatrick, Harris, and Drawve, 2020), etc.

## 2.2. Organisational commitment

Organisational commitment is one of the most important work-related attitudes that employees have towards their organisations. It was introduced in the literature in the 1970s of the 20th century (Steers, 1977), and many definitions regarding this construct have been developed so far.

According to some authors, organisational commitment is the psychological attachment of workers to their workplace (Becker, Billings, Eveleth, and Gilbert, 1996). According to others, organisational commitment has a broader meaning, and they see this construct as the degree to which employees identify with the organisation where they work, the degree of commitment they show, and whether they are willing to leave it (Greenberg, and Baron, 2008). Some authors stress other aspects of organisational commitment, as they say that it is the degree to which people are involved with their organisations and are interested in remaining with them (Memari et al., 2013).

Having in mind the previously defined definitions, it can be concluded that this is a multidimensional concept. This fact was familiar to Mayer and Alen, who, at the beginning of the 1990s created a three-dimensional model of organisational commitment (Meyer, and Allen, 1991). This model consists of three types of commitment: affective, normative, and continuance commitment. Affective commitment refers to the employee's positive emotional attachment to the organisation;

normative commitment refers to the feelings of obligation to stay within the organisation; and continuance commitment refers to the perception that the costs of leaving the organisation will be high. Speaking in general, Mayer and Alen state that organisational commitment is a psychological state that characterises organisational members' relationships with the organisation and has implications for the decision to continue or discontinue membership in the organisation (Meyer, and Allen, 1997).

Since the tradition of investigating this concept has lasted for more than 50 years, it has been widely documented that this construct has an influence on many other relevant work-related attitudes and behaviours, such as organisational citizenship behaviour (Asiedu, Sarfo, and Adjei, 2014), job performance (Memari et al., 2013), turnover intentions (Faloye, 2014), etc. It is also found that organisational commitment is influenced by numerous factors. Among the mayor are: job satisfaction, leadership style, organisational climate (Ariffin, and Che Ha, 2014), working conditions (Khalili, and Asmawi, 2012), etc.

Regarding the last factor, it was found that a comfortable environment can increase the morale of employees on the job and, consequently, their organisational commitment (Ch, Zainab, Maqsood, and Sana, 2013). On the contrary, if the working conditions are not satisfactory, there is a great probability that the organisational commitment will be lower.

Despite the fact that working conditions are an important factor in organisational commitment, the influence of the working conditions associated with the fear of COVID-19 on organisational commitment did not gain sufficient attention from the authors. Therefore, to provide more comprehensive insight into organisational commitment in the conditions of the fear of COVID-19, empirical research was undertaken, and the results are presented in this paper. Special attention in this research was put on the influence of socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents on the relationship between *fear of COVID-19 and organisational commitment*.

## 3. HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

In the previous period, many empirical studies that examined the influence of socio-demographic variables on organisational commitment have been conducted so far, but with mixed results.

When it comes to the influence of gender, in most of the studies, no significant differences among females and males upon organisational

commitment were found (Khalili, and Asmawi, 2012). Yet, in some studies, differences based on gender were found when it came to the level of commitment, types of commitment that were higher, etc. (Khalili, and Asmawi, 2012; Ch et al., 2013). These mixed results indicate that there are many situational factors that moderate the relationship between this demographic variable and organisational commitment.

When it comes to the relationship between marital status and organisational commitment, it was found that marital status has emerged as a consistent predictor of organisational commitment (Tikare, 2015). As married people have more family responsibilities and need more stability and security in their jobs, they are likely to be more committed to their current organisation than their unmarried counterparts (Peng et al., 2022).

When it comes to the differences in fear of COVID-19 based on gender, studies mostly confirmed that women expressed a higher level of fear than men (Alsharawy, Spoon, Smith, and Ball, 2021). In addition, it was also found that throughout the first year of the pandemic, women experienced a greater fall in mental health and felt lonelier than men (OECD, 2021).

When it comes to investigating the differences in fear of COVID-19 upon marital status, there have not been such studies so far, but some conclusions could be found in the studies that investigated the differences in well-being during the pandemic of COVID-19 upon marital status. It was found that married women reported significantly lower wellbeing than married men, but it was also found that the wellbeing of single females was significantly lower than both married women and men (Peng et al., 2022).

Based on the above, the hypothesis that will be tested in this paper is as follows:

H1: The effect of gender on fear of the COVID-19 pandemic and organisational commitment is different depending on marital status.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

*Context of the research and the sample.* In Serbia, the majority of high schools are established and run by the government. Hence, this only state-owned high schools were selected as the research sample for this study. The pilot study targeted teaching staff exclusively. A total of 164 respondents were invited via school institutional emails, and their anonymity was ensured by the researchers. The survey was conducted during

2023, using Google Forms as the online tool for distribution. It was emphasized to the respondents that when answering, they have in mind the period from March 2020 to March 2021. In Table 1 sociodemographic characteristics are presented.

**Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents**

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Gender	Female	125	76.2
	Male	39	23.8
Age	< 25	2	1.2
	26 - 40	39	23.8
	41 - 55	90	54.9
	> 55	33	20.1
Marital status	cohabitation	8	4.9
	unmarried	34	20.7
	married	100	61.0
	divorced	17	10.4
COVID-19 disease	Yes	110	67.1
	No	54	32.9
Hospitalisation	Yes	7	4.3
	No	157	95.7

Source: Authors

Women (76.2%) took part in the research in comparison to men (20.6%). A little more than half of the respondents (54.9%) are in mature age (from 41 to 55 years old). About a fifth of respondents (20.1%) are over 55 years old. Almost two-thirds of respondents (61.0%) are married, and about a fifth of respondents (20.7%) have never married. About two-thirds of the respondents (67.1%) were infected with COVID-19, and only 4.3% were hospitalized during the infection.

*Measurements.* The questionnaire comprises three sections. The initial section aims to gather demographic information from respondents. The subsequent parts focus on evaluating high school teachers' level of fear of COVID-19 disease and organizational commitment.

To measure the level of fear of COVID-19 the fear of COVID-19 Scale (FCV-19S) was implemented (Ahorsu et al., 2020). The scale consists of seven items measuring the level of fear of COVID-19 using Likert scale ranging from (1) totally disagree to (5) totally agree. The one item used is "I am scared a lot of COVID-19."

To measure organisational commitment, the questionnaire developed by Allen and Meyer (1990) was applied. This variable was measured in general terms, not separately by subvariables such as affective, continuance, and normative commitment. Each commitment type was represented by six items, rated on a 5-point Likert

scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." For example, one adapted statement for affective commitment is: "I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to this organization." In terms of continuance commitment is: "Right now, staying with my job at this organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire." Lastly, one statement measuring normative commitment is: "I would not leave my organization right now because of my sense of obligation to it." All explored variables demonstrated satisfactory reliability, as assessed by Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Table 2). The validity of the fear of Covid-19 is below the limit of good validity ( $\alpha < 0.7$ ), but it can be considered acceptable.

*Statistical analysis.* SPSS version 23 was employed to apply suitable statistical methods to the data collected from the study questionnaire responses. Descriptive statistics including means, frequencies, and standard deviations were utilized

in the study report to examine the research areas. In order to test whether there are differences by gender and marital status in relation to commitment to the organization and fear, a two-way MANOVA was used (Johnson, and Wichern, 2007; Kline, 2011; Daniel, 2016). The dependent variables in the model are organizational commitment and fear of COVID-19.

## 5. RESEARCH RESULTS

Values on the scale of fear and organizational commitment were calculated using the regression method in the confirmatory factor analysis procedure, taking into account the assumed structure of each of the factors examined by the questionnaire. The factor scores obtained in this way are a linear combination of empirical variables that takes into account the correlation between factors, factors and questions (items), as well as the correlation between questions (items).

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics of fear and organizational commitment**

Item	M	Me	Mo	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Min.	Max.	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Fear of COVID-19	1.933	1.731	1.279	0.740	0.997	0.084	1.263	4.145	0.618
Organizational Commitment	3.442	3.588	0.970	0.958	-0.494	-0.250	0.968	5.101	0.862

Source: Authors

*Descriptive statistics.* In Table 2, descriptive statistics of the sample is presented. We can conclude that on average, fear is weakly expressed among employees ( $M = 1.93$ ;  $SD = 0.88$ ). Half of the respondents have a score of 1.73 on the fear scale, and half more. The most common score in the distribution is also low ( $Mo = 1.28$ ).

Also, on average, teachers are most committed to the organization ( $M = 3.44$ ;  $SD = 0.96$ ), and least afraid ( $M = 1.93$ ;  $SD = 0.74$ ). Half of the respondents have a score of 3.59 on the scale of commitment to the organization, and half have more. The most common result in the distribution is low ( $Mo = 0.97$ ).

The distribution of scores on the fear scale is skewed to the right (Skewness is 1.00) and slightly peaked (Kurtosis is 0.08). The Shapiro-Wilk test indicates that the distribution of scores on the fear scale cannot be considered approximately normal,  $W(164) = 0.84$ ;  $p < 0.001$ .

The distribution of scores on the organizational commitment scale is skewed to the left (Skewness is -0.49) and flattened (Kurtosis is -0.25). The Shapiro-Wilk test indicates that the distribution of

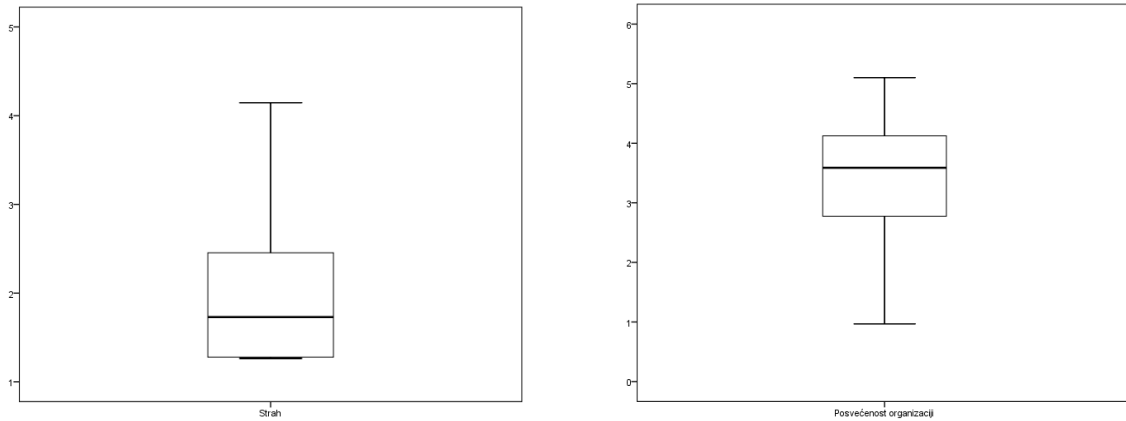
scores on the organizational commitment scale cannot be considered approximately normal,  $W(164) = 0.97$ ;  $p = 0.002$ .

*MANOVA assumptions testing.* The dependent variables in the model are organizational commitment and fear, while independent variables in the model are gender and marital status. Gender is a dichotomous variable. Marital status is categorized as follows: common-law or married and those who are not in a union (single, divorced and widowed).

Assumptions for the use of MANOVA test were preliminarily tested: normality, presence of extreme values, linearity, multicollinearity, singularity and homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices.

The presence of multivariate extreme values in the data was tested using Mahalanobis distances. No multivariate extreme values were observed. The critical value of Mahalanobis distance for 2 dependent variables is 13.82. The maximum Mahalanobis distance value in the data is 9.37.

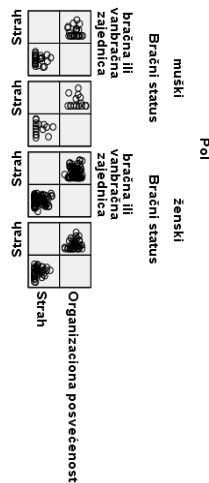
The presence of univariate extreme values in the data was checked using a boxplot (Picture 1).



**Picture 1. Box plots**  
Source: Authors

As can be seen in Picture 1, there are no univariate extreme values for any dependent variable.

Linearity was checked using a scatter plot. Using the diagram, it was checked whether there is a linear relationship between each pair of dependent variables in each category of the independent variable (Picture 2).



**Picture 2. Linearity**  
Source: Authors

No violation of linearity assumptions was observed in Picture 2.

Multicollinearity of the dependent variables was checked using the Pearson correlation coefficient. There is a positive and weak correlation between fear and commitment to the organization, but it is not significant,  $r(164) = 0.08$ ;  $p = 0.34$ .

The assumption of equality of variance was checked by Levene's test (Table 3).

**Table 3. Result of Levene's test of homogeneity of variance**

Item	F	df1	df2	p
Fear of COVID-19	3.345	3	160	0.021
Organizational Commitment	1.839	3	160	0.142

Source: Authors

Table 3 shows that the assumption was violated for the dependent variable fear,  $p < 0.05$ . The assumption was not violated for the dependent variable of commitment to the organization,  $p > 0.05$  (Table 3).

The assumption of equality of the covariance matrix is not violated, Box M = 31.01;  $p = 0.18$ .

**Results of the two-factor MANOVA.** In order to test proposed hypothesis, the two-factor MANOVA was applied. The results of two-factor MANOVA test are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4. Descriptive statistics of fear and organizational commitment**

Item	Fear of COVID-19				Organizational Commitment			
	Female		Male		Female		Male	
Gender	Not in marriage/relationship	Marriage/Relationship	Not in marriage/relationship	Marriage/Relationship	Not in marriage/relationship	Marriage/Relationship	Not in marriage/relationship	Marriage/Relationship
M	1.962	2.042	1.629	1.694	3.364	3.561	3.732	2.976
SD	0.760	0.790	0.522	0.540	0.983	0.875	0.777	1.162

Source: Authors

According to the results presented in Table 4 we can state that:

- There is a significant interaction effect of gender and marital status on the combination of fear and commitment to the organization,  $F(2, 159) = 0.04$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ; Pillai's Trace = 0.01; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ .
- There is a significant effect of gender on the combination of fear and commitment to the organization,  $F(2, 159) = 3.09$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ; Pillai's Trace = 0.048; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ .
- There is no significant effect of marital status on the combination of fear and organisational commitment,  $F(2, 159) = 1.40$ ;  $p = 0.25$ ; Pillai's Trace = 0.01; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ .
- When the dependent variables are considered individually, there is no significant interaction effect of gender and marital status on fear;  $F(1) = 0.003$ ;  $p = 0.96$ ; partial  $\eta^2 < 0.001$ .
- There is a significant interaction effect of gender and marital status on organizational commitment;  $F(1) = 7.11$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ .
- Men who are not married have the most pronounced organizational commitment ( $M = 3.73$ ;  $SD = 0.78$ ).
- Women who are in a married or cohabiting union ( $M = 3.56$ ;  $SD = 0.88$ ) have higher organizational commitment compared to women themselves ( $M = 3.36$ ;  $SD = 0.98$ ) and men in a married or cohabiting union ( $M = 2.98$ ;  $SD = 1.16$ ).

Based on the previously presented data we can conclude that proposed research hypothesis is confirmed. In other words, there is significant interaction effect of gender and marital status on the combination of dependent variables – the fear of COVID-19 and the organizational commitment.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

The results of the study provide the foundation for some recommendations that could be made to the authorities. When it comes to policymakers, in order to provide better coping for employees in the education system with similar situations that might occur in the future, several measures, such as trainings for dealing with stress, guidelines related to health and well-being, and trainings in alternative teaching methods that are based on or not on the internet, could be implemented.

The management of educational institutions should consider different ways to create a positive organisational culture and climate that will encourage a positive attitude towards the institutions.

The implications of this paper are scientific as well. Namely, this paper provides a new insight into the effect of fear of the COVID-19 virus on the organisational commitment of the teaching staff, which has not been the focus of the authors so far. In addition, by focusing on the impact of gender and marital differences on the relation between the fear of COVID-19 and organisational commitment, scientifically based supporting measures for dealing with the fear of health could be made.

## CONCLUSION

This paper dealt with the impact of fear of COVID-19 from the perspective of socio-demographic variables such as gender and marital status. It has been stressed that fear of COVID-19 has many negative consequences related to mental health and work-related attitudes and behaviours, where organisational commitment is one of the most important.

For the testing of the hypothesis that the effect of gender on fear of the COVID-19 pandemic and organisational commitment depends on marital status, empirical research was done. The results showed that there is a significant interaction effect of gender and marital status on the combination of dependent variables – the fear of COVID-19 and organisational commitment. In addition, it was found that men who are not married have the highest level of organisational commitment on one side, but on the other, women who are married or live in cohabiting unions have higher organisational commitment compared to women themselves and men who are married or live in cohabiting unions.

Although this paper has some contribution to science and practice, it has some limitations as well. They refer to the sample size, which is not representative, which further leads to the fact that the conclusion in this paper cannot be generalised. In addition, the survey was realised two years after the lockdown in Serbia ended, so the respondents may not have provided adequate answers.

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