Fear of COVID-19 and its impact on holiday planning and working abroad

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***Abstract**: Fear of COVID-19 displayed moderately behavioral changes in the population. It motivates people to follow the public health regulations to aim to reduce the chance of spreading the virus (such as social distancing), which leads to further psychological consequences. It has a significant impact on tourism due to travel restrictions. WHO predicts that international tourist arrivals will decreased markably worldwide in 2020. The coronavirus pandemic affects the student mobility programs (such as Erasmus+) as well, and individuals who have planned to study or work abroad has to face significant uncertainty. Our research aims to adapt the Hungarian version of the Fear of COVID-19 Scale (FCV-19S) and the exploration of the impact of fear of coronavirus on the plans to travel, study or work abroad among the Z and Y generations. The role of emotional intelligence, perceived stress and social media consumption and the anxiety caused by coronavirus pandemic will be examined as well. The study study explain our reasearch plan and preliminary results too.*

***Keywords**: COVID-19, perceived stress, well-being, emotional intelligence, EQ, social media, Fear of COVID-19 Scale, FCV-19S, safety*

1 Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-Cov-2 virus, affected each country and fundamentally changed our everyday life. The virus spread from Asia in December 2019, and it quickly reached Europe. The first coordinated restrictive measures were applied in March in Hungary in order to save lives, followed by strict safety public health messages such as obligatory facemask wearing and social distancing. Employees have been sent back home to work remotely, and the

educational institutions have been closed due to the lockdown. People faced drastic changes and had to deal with the economic and psychological consequences of social isolation. In this situation, feelings of fear and anxiety became more pronounced than ever before.

When this paper was made in June 2020, half of the world's population has been tired of the restrictions, social isolation, and economic consequences, and the other half need further safety measures and afraid of “another wave” of COVID-19. This study aims to explore differences in the age group 18-30 regarding the sense of safety. The first group rejected their original plans and decided to stay in Hungary during the summer. The second group insisted on their previous holiday or employment plans. We were looking for answers to the following questions: Are there any significant differences between the traveler and non-traveler group regarding the fear of COVID-19, general, and mental well-being? How social media (especially Facebook) impact the information-seeking behavior related to coronavirus? Does it play a role in stress reduction in this situation? Are there any significant differences between males and females regarding the sense of safety? What does make a hotel safe during the pandemic?

In this study, the research plan and hypotheses will be shown in detail, and the preliminary results will be described as well.

2 Effects of COVID-19 pandemic

Nowadays, dealing with coronavirus pandemic is one of the biggest challenges of the whole world. This quickly spreading virus has a mortality rate of 3.6% based on the data of 2020 first quarter [1], and almost every country confirmed cases until mid-March [2]. Countries react to the pandemic differently, but infection control and finding effective treatment became the primary goal of almost every culture. Cultural differences may play a significant role in protective measures. Collectivist countries may accept the restriction and social distancing need quicker than individualist cultures [3]. While each country works on reducing the transmission rate, the economic aspects of the lockdown in tourism, travel restriction, and the psychological consequences of the long-term social isolation of people have to be considered. Tourism is a labor sensitive sector in the European Union and directly contributes approximately 6.9% of employment on average to OECD countries. The sector employs many seasonal and temporary workers. The hotel industry heavily relies on international recruitment [4]. If the crisis continues in the peak season of the Mediterranean (June - July - August), many of the jobs will be affected, and many hotels have to face serious financial problems. The situation is almost the same everywhere globally and causes a more significant impact on countries where tourism contributes to the GDP highly (Figure 1). The latest UNWTO report estimates an approximately 22% decline in international tourist arrivals in the first quarter of 2020, and a total of 58 - 78% decrease is predicted for the whole year [5].

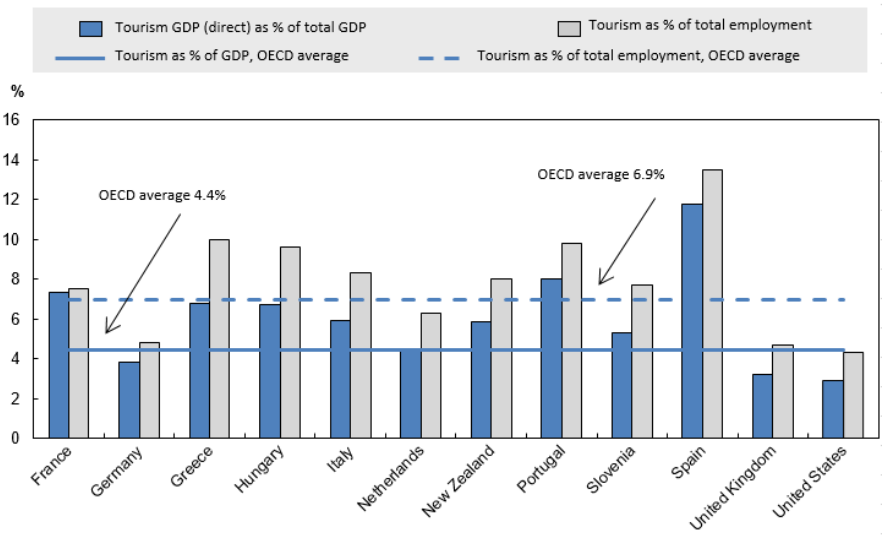

Figure 1
The direct contribution of tourism in OECD economies
Source: OECD Tourism Trends and Policies [6]

The pandemic also has a severe impact on tourist behavior. Due to the fear of infection, they may modify their holiday plans and even cancel seasonal employment contracts abroad. Due to the lockdown and travel restrictions in March, the seasonal workers and sojourners (such as Erasmus+ students and interns) returned to their home countries and faced increased employment and educational uncertainty.

Based on the high infection rate, people quickly started to fear the coronavirus and agreed to apply many restrictions to avoid the further spread of COVID-19. While fear may motivate people to accept public health measurements such as necessary social distancing and wearing face mask [7], it may also lead to numerous psychological effects [8]. The fear about COVID-19 lies in the lack of vaccine and high mortality rate, and it can be overwhelming. Social distancing causes social isolation, and many individuals feel lonely. Due to the lack of personal connections, they turn to the internet, which is flown by fake news about the coronavirus and its possible long term effect [9]. Employees who are affected by the economic consequences of the pandemic worry about the loss of their job. Parents who have to stay at home and take care of their children (because most educational institutions are closed) face a stressful period, where their work-life balance vanishes momentarily. The central phenomenon of COVID-19 and its long-term effects are fear and uncertainty.

3 Research methodology

Our research aims to identify the variables related to the fear of COVID-19 and measure this emotion's effect. We prepared a quantitative study with an online questionnaire[2], which consisted of validated measurement tools and an excessive amount of questions related to the present pandemic situation. The final Hungarian language questionnaire was launched on June 1, 2020, and we plan to collect responses until August 31, 2020. Our survey contains three main blocks. The first one consisted of *demographic questions* (such as age and gender) and validated tools. Our previous study confirmed the connection between *emotional intelligence* (EQ) and increased stress and uncertainty endurance during the COVID-19 pandemic [10]; thus, Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Scale (SSREIS) [11] have been used to assess the emotional skills of the respondents. It contains twenty-six questions, and the respondents have to express the level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale for questions such as "I like to share my emotions with others." *General well-being* and *mental well-being* were measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) [12], which contains five items, and The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) [13], which contains fourteen items. The *strength of fear of COVID-19* was measured by the Fear of COVID Scale (FCV-19S) [14], with seven questions such as "It makes me uncomfortable to think about coronavirus." This scale focuses on the psychological and physical signs of fear. The respondents could use a 5-point agreement scale. To assess the respondents' general stress level, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) has been used [15]. It contains ten questions, and a 5-point Likert scale has been used for the answers.

Based on previous studies on the effect of negative news on social media, we hypothesized that coronavirus news on Facebook creates further anxiety, and most of people do not use social media as a reliable information source during the pandemic. We use the Information Seeking in Facebook Scale (ISFS) to assess the *role of Facebook in information-seeking*. The measurement tool was adapted to the pandemic situation [16]. Twelve items of the original tool have been used.

We assessed the actions and behaviors that can increase the individuals' sense of safety against the coronavirus. Eleven preventive measurements (e.g., handwashing, wearing face maks or gloves, social distancing) have been listed, and the respondent had to choose on a 5-point scale how essential for them to that specific action in order to feel safe in general. We hypothesized that the more troubled an individual is due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the more actions they will welcome to apply in their everyday lives.

[2] The online questionnaire in Hungarian is available via QuestionPro: https://www.questionpro.com/t/AQTicZhwNh

The second block of our survey contained questions regarding the *plans of the respondents*. We form groups based on their answers: individuals who (1) stay in Hungary and rejected previous holiday plans, (2) instead abroad, they choose a domestic holiday, (3) plan a holiday abroad, (4) plan to work abroad in a hotel. Based on the country of destination, we plan to make further comparative analysis. Respondents who will not go on holiday in 2020 can submit the survey at this point; the others had to answer further questions.

Thirteen questions assessed the aspects of the *selection of the country of destination.* The respondent could use a 5-point agreement scale to express their viewpoint. The list contained aspects related to the management of the coronavirus, the public health actions, the health care system, and the number of confirmed infections and deaths related to coronavirus. Thirty-seven questions assessed the core of the *fear of COVID-19 concerning travel abroad*. The respondents could use a 5-point agreement scale and had to rate items such as "I cannot travel back home by plane due to travel restrictions.", "I have to spend time at quarantine.", "I will die.", "The hotel will not apply enough safety actions, and I will be ill." This part of the online survey was hidden for the respondents who will spend their holiday in Hungary.

The third, last block of our survey, contained a list of *preventive measurements in the hotel, which can increase the tourists' feeling of safety* or the employees. This part's main goal was the possible distinction between the aspect of tourism and employee regarding preventive measures. The respondent could express on a 5-point agreement scale how much of a safety measure can increase their sense of safety. This part included items related to the hotel's communal spaces, room service, hotel entertainment, restaurants, and conditions of bookings, social distancing rules, and employee regulations.

4 Preliminary results and discussion

The survey is not closed until the end of summer; thus, the following report contains a preliminary analysis of respondents' perception of the effect of COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the low number of respondents and the unbalanced female-male ratio at the time of the MEB Conference (June 25, 2020), more complex correlation and variance analysis have not been applied, and the results are not triangulated with the rest of the data. Thus, this study provides an incomplete picture that should be interpreted with caution. A more complex summary overview of the research results will be available once the survey and the research project are closed.

The 62 received answers have been analyzed by SPSS 20 statistical software. The respondent are aged between 18 and 30 (mean = 23.41, SD = 3.421). The results are not representative, but the received answers, and its pattern confirmed that collecting more answers is worth further efforts.

4.1 Effect of COVID-19 on daily life

The fear of COVID-19 manifests primarily in anxiety due to news related to the coronavirus (2.62), followed by a general uncomfortable feeling due to the pandemic (2.54). Fear of possible death is in the respondents' consciousness (1.62), sometimes accompanied by sleep disturbances (1.57). Physical symptoms of anxiety (sweating of palms, heart palpitation) are not characteristic features of fear of coronavirus (1.08). In conclusion, the pandemic's most stressful aspect is the constant flow of news, which creates further uncertainty and anxiety.

Respondents have been asked what preventive measures contribute to their sense of safety in their daily life (Figure 2). As a result, the most important aspects are regular hand sanitizing (4.68 out of 5) and regular hand washing (4.54). Almost all of the respondents think that these safety measures are essential to avoid the coronavirus's negative consequences. Both protective measures significantly contribute to the respondents' sense of safety. It is followed by keeping physical distance during shopping (3.77) and wearing face masks in closed environments (3.54). Not everybody agrees with the restricted physical activities such as handshakes and different welcoming traditions (3.31). It is in line with the difficulties of the social distancing and the psychological consequences of the isolation. The least sense of safety is provided by wearing face masks outside of the buildings (2.00) and gloves (1.85), which can be interpreted as "not important" and "absolutely not important."

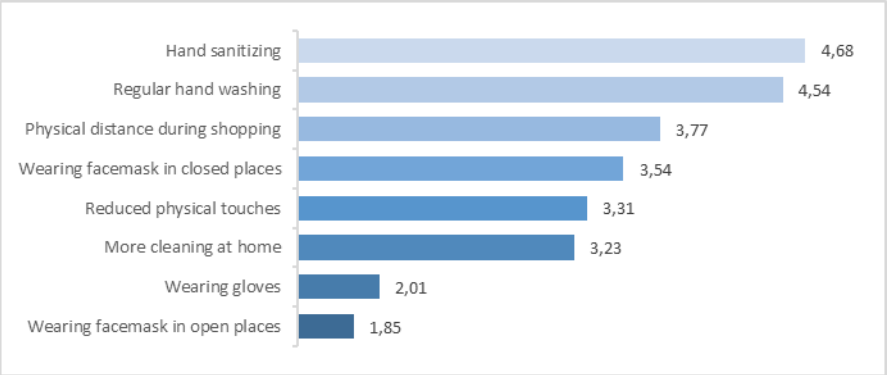

Figure 2
Aspects of sense of safety in Hungary
Source: own data

Respondents were asked how they view Facebook and the information it contains about COVID-19 in terms of obtaining information. Surprisingly, respondents use Facebook in relation to the coronavirus mostly for entertainment purposes: they

find memes[3] about COVID-19 can relieve stress and be entertaining (3.62). Most of them do not use Facebook as a useful information source regarding pandemic (2.17). Neither the news posted to Facebook nor the respondents' Facebook friends are considered a reliable and credible source of information (1.5). If we refer back to the results of the fear of COVID-19, the most critical factor was the anxiety caused by the news. Interestingly, respondents tend to avoid social media content related to coronavirus because it causes extra stress but finds relief in Facebook's entertaining content, minimizing their anxiety.

4.2 Effect of COVID-19 pandemic on travel plans

Most of the respondents (33.33%) will stay in Hungary and gave up on holiday this summer due to the pandemic. 23.92% canceled international travel and planned to spend their holiday in a Hungarian hotel. Also, 24.35% insist on their holiday plans abroad, but change the date and the country of destinations as well. Plans of 10% of the respondents stay constant. Less than 5% of Hungarians change the date of holiday/employment or destination country due to the pandemic (Figure 3).

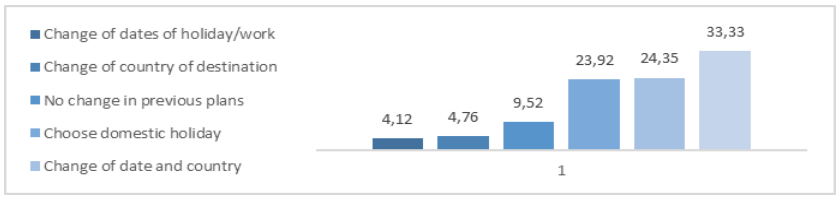

Figure 3
Changing of travel plans due to COVID-19 pandemic (%)
Source: own data

Regarding the summer plans, respondents could define the most crucial aspect of selecting a destination country (Figure 4). Cost-effective travel solutions and the healthcare system's general quality were emphasized as the most determining factors; both items have 3.2 average points out of 5. The least influential factors are the number of confirmed infections (1.8) and the number of confirmed deaths (1.6) in the destination country.

[3] Meme, unit of cultural information spread by imitation. The term meme (from the Greek mimema, meaning "imitated") was introduced in 1976 by British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his work The Selfish Gene. https://www.britannica.com/topic/meme

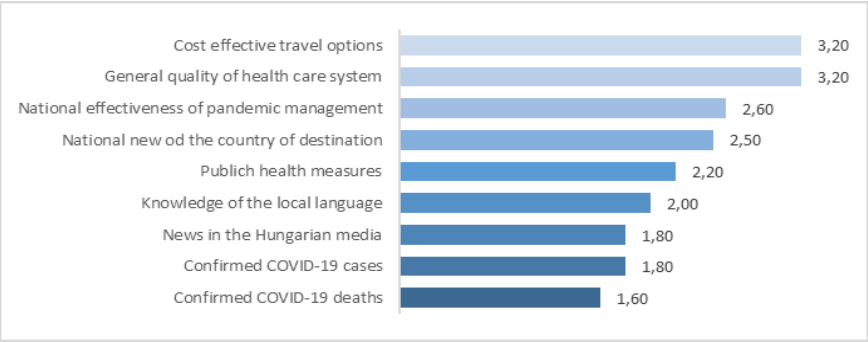

Figure 4
Essential aspects of selecting the country of destination
Source: own data

The judgment of a country by the Hungarian media was almost irrelevant for the responders (1.8), respondents were mainly interested in the international news (2.6), and this aspect (news itself) was more important than the local management of the coronavirus pandemic (2.5).

Respondents who plan to go abroad for work or holiday were asked to rate their fears related to a possible coronavirus infection in the country of destination (Figure 5). According to the test results, they are most afraid of becoming seriously ill (3.56) and being hospitalized (3.45), or being quarantined abroad (3.2). Interestingly this fear is more significant than the infection itself (2.00). The most unimportant aspect of the fear is that the hotel does not comply with proper hygiene standards (1.6). It seems that respondents trust the hotel safety protocols in general. As a result, respondents afraid of the health consequences of the illness (hospitalization, being sick), and the travel restrictions (quarantine, inability to travel back home) more than the COVID-19 infection itself.

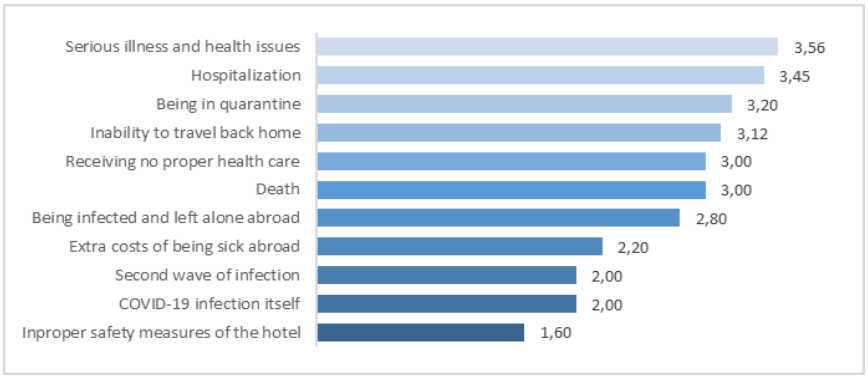

Figure 5
Most important fears related to traveling abroad
Source: own data

4.3 Role of hotel safety measures in the sense of safety

Based on the country of destinations, the hotels have to follow specific rules related to COVID-19 prevention and apply several safety measures to avoid further spreading the virus. Hotels who plan to operate during the summer season (many stays closed in 2020 due to financial reasons), may implement further safety actions and offer a safe but comfortable environment to the guests. As Figure 6 shows, respondents rated the frequency of the cleanings of community spaces (entrance, hall, reception desks, bar, outdoor spaces) as the most critical factor(4.00), which was strictly linked to the continuously available hand sanitizers at the hotel and more intensive room cleaning such as air sterilization with UV light or ozone (3.89). Social distancing within the hotel's community spaces has been rated highly (3.33), and the obligatory face mask (3.22) and gloves (2.78) wearing of the employees added to the sense of safety of the guests. On the other hand, respondents expressed their need for available face masks and gloves free of charge in the rooms too (3.11) but did not agree with the guests' obligatory facemask wearing (2.67). They want to feel safe, but they prefer if the actions are done by the hotels' employees, not them.

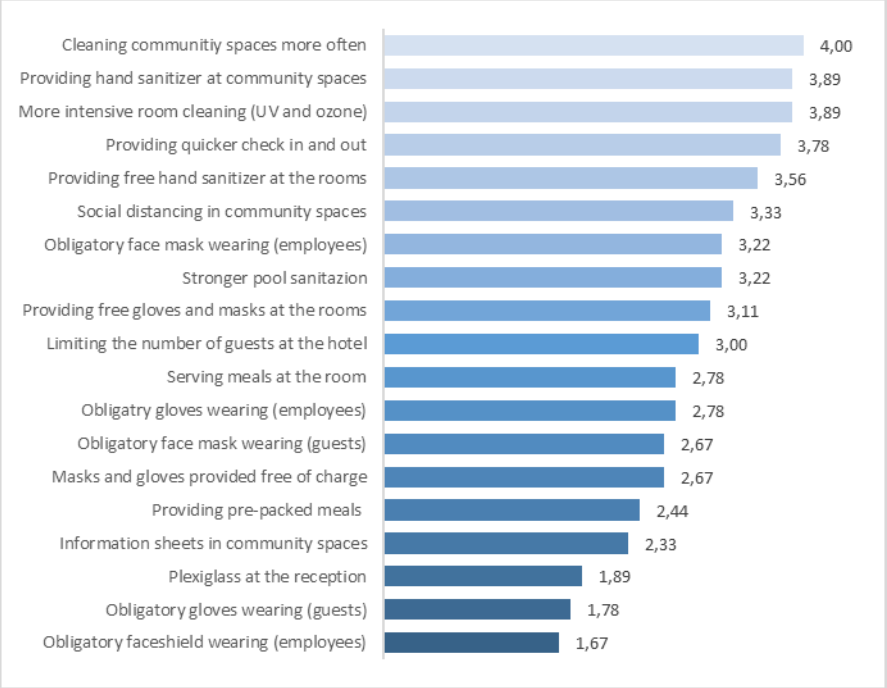

Figure 6
Safety measures at the hotel which strengthen the sense of safety
Source: own data

Safety measures, which could reduce the service quality at a hotel (lack of buffet, no all-inclusive service, restricted restaurants/bars, pre-packed meals, and the lack of classic á-la-carte restaurant experience) have not been rated as essential aspects of the sense of safety. Guests still want this kind of hotel experience. Physical panels (e.g., plexiglass) at the reception, between tables or even sunbeds, seemed unimportant. Interestingly three safety measure was rated "absolutely not important": Plexiglass at the reception (1.89), obligatory gloves wearing of the guests at the community spaces (1.78) and obligatory face shield of the waiters and hotel employees. These are the most "scenic" expressions of the coronavirus pandemic and the fear related to it. Thus guests and employees would like to avoid these. It resulted that the best safety measures in a hotel are that one, which can maximize the protection but minimize the impact on service quality. Guests would like to spend their holiday as "COVID-free" as possible while staying safe and healthy.

Conclusions

COVID-19 pandemic has drastic economic consequences, especially in the tourism sector. It causes outstanding financial problems for the hotels, that has to face the reduced guest numbers and increased cost of safety and preventive measures as well. The uncertainty will last until the first round of successful vaccination. The psychological consequences of prolonged lockdown and social isolation lead to the increased need for freedom during the summer: many people do not want to cancel their previous holiday plans. Seasonal hotel workers wait for the end of the travel restrictions and the good news from their employer that they can travel and start (or continue) working. On the other hand, numerous individuals are against the opening of the borders and afraid of the "second wave" of infection and support further and even stricter safety measures.

Regarding working abroad and holiday planning, we explored exciting findings. Preliminary results of our complex research show that 34% of the young Hungarians canceled their previous summer holiday or working plans and stay at home this year. 56% had to modify plans (date or country of destination), and just 10% of the respondents' plans stayed unchanged. In general, the most relevant factor of fear of COVID-19 belongs to the news, which causes anxiety for most people. This aspect is more remarkable than the physical symptoms of anxiety. While flown of (fake) news stress people, they use Facebook to find relief in entertaining content such as coronavirus memes. On the other hand, they do not rely on social media as a valid information source. The necessary preventive actions based on the respondents are hand sanitizing, keeping physical distance in general, and wearing face masks in closed environments. Wearing gloves or face masks outdoor or face shields are not welcomed by most of people. We can see the same pattern in case of a hotel stay: people agree with more regular and intense cleaning at the hotel and strict safety regulations regarding the employees (obligatory face mask and gloves), but do not want as much safety protocol, which can affect the service quality of the hotel (plexiglass, lack of buffet). In general,

people are most afraid of the coronavirus infection's physical and health consequences (for example, serious illness, hospitalization, or quarantine). This fear determines the importance of factors related to the selection of the country of destination. The most important aspects are cost-effective travel opportunities and the country's health care system's general quality. If somebody plans to travel abroad, they seek information from international sources instead of Hungarian ones. Most people do not trust Hungarian media, and the number of confirmed infections and deaths is not relevant information for them when they plan their holiday or employment abroad.

After the closure of the survey (Aug 31, 2020), we expect exciting results that can explain the connection between the fear of coronavirus and the emotional intelligence, stress level, and well-being and its overall effect on the sense of safety.

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