

Do Religious Students in Korea Have Different Opinions about the Risk and Dangers of Covid-19 Compared to Non-Religious Students?

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Abstract

This paper tried to explore the view of religious and non-religious people on severity of coronavirus disease 2019 in South Korea. Authors employs a survey method to investigate if religious people in South Korea have different opinions about the risk and dangers of coronavirus disease 2019 compared to non-religious people. The samples for this research were collected via Google Form and paper-pencil based from the university students of Korea. Correlation coefficient tests was performed and the difference-of-means t-test to see if there was a significant correlation between religiosity and the belief that the coronavirus is dangerous. The results showed that is no strong evidence to support our hypothesis.

Keywords: Coronavirus disease 2019, Difference-of-means t-test, Perspectives, Religion, Republic of Korea.

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the coronavirus, which began in Wuhan, China in 2019, and the first reporting of Korea was on January 20, 2020. During the onset of the virus, the Korean government acted promptly by increasing the national alert level from yellow to blue, which is the second level out of the four-level national crisis management system. This meant that the Republic of Korea health authority had to strengthen the surveillance nationwide for the virus in health facilities, restrict travelers, and impose the citizens to wear masks in public. As a result, Korea was able to contain the virus to less than fifty confirmed cases within the whole nation.¹ Then, on February 18, 2020, a 61-year-old Korean Sincheonji woman was tested positive for the COVID-19 in Daegu, South Korea.

Known as “Patient 31”, the Sincheonji woman caused a critical turning point in which the rapid transmission of the virus within the religious organization brought a steep spike of confirmed cases though the rest of the Korean society.

This is known as the first major outbreak in Korea. Immediately, the nation responded to the sudden outbreak and after two months of taking safety measures, the country was commended worldwide for its efforts to contain the virus. Nevertheless, the nation experienced more waves of clustered infections in May, June, and August. And though they were not as severe as the first wave during the spring, all of the following outbreaks were similar to the first wave in that they were all associated with church-linked infections. This caught the government as well as the public’s attention to focus on strictly restricting local churches and any other religious facilities from holding religious services that involved the worshippers from assembling together.

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Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:

www.pnrjournal.com

DOI:

10.47750/pnr.2022.13.03.123

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How to cite this article: Maidul Islam, Dan-A Kim, Min Yeol Lee, Do Religious Students in Korea Have Different Opinions about the Risk and Dangers of Covid-19 Compared to Non-Religious Students?, J PHARM NEGATIVE RESULTS 2022;13: 823-829.

Despite strict restriction current total case load in South Korea is 552,000 with a death toll reaching 4591, however we must admit that South Korea has done commendable job in keep the death rate lower than many developed nations without locking down the country. Currently COVID-19 has spread to more than 200 different countries with a total case of 273 million worldwide.² Figure 1 and Figure 2 give us some understanding about the past six months cases worldwide and in South Korea.

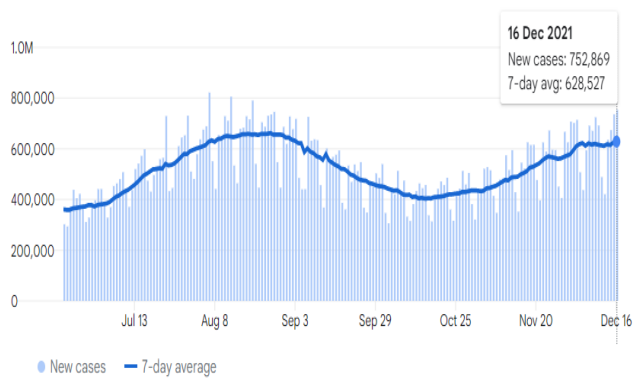


Fig.1. Number of cases worldwide in last six months³



Fig.2. Number of cases in South Korea in last six months³

Korean government put restriction to flatter the curve, however, these restrictions of social gatherings have received criticism, as some argue that it violates their freedom of rights. This kind of lashes and criticism was especially heightened in regarding religious gatherings, as they claim it violates their freedom of participation in social, cultural, and religious activities. In the past, religion provided a sanctuary for people, and people relied on it. But now, religion is no longer a place to rest for people due to the spread of Covid-19. That’s why, despite state restriction to refrain from religious activities to prevent the spread of the virus, religious people still hold church services or mass meetings, demonstrating how religious people are not as affected by the government restrictions. Therefore, this paper believes that religious people in Korea are against the government from banning and restricting religious gatherings during the pandemic and hold the belief that the

virus is not as hazardous as most non-religious people believe and thus, it is more crucial for them to continue with their religious practices. Thus, the main purpose of our research is to see if religious people in Korea different opinions about the risk and dangers of COVID-19 have compared to non-religious people. We expect that the data will show a strong correlation between how religious an individual is to his or her thoughts about the coronavirus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the spread of COVID-19, the contemporary world is going through a lot of difficulties in various areas such as the economy, the society, and the health of the general population. Because the COVID-19 is an infectious disease, it is not surprising that the main problem of the spread is due to the people participating in various gatherings and meetings where social distancing was not being kept. More specifically, there seems to be a lot of cases which proves that people with extreme religious beliefs are more likely to spread the COVID-19. For example, in India, more than 22,000 people who came in contact with the members of the Tablighi Jamaat were quarantined and isolated.⁴ Moreover, 40,000 people in the Indian state of Punjab were quarantined after discovering that the spread started from a single Sikh priest⁵ who was confirmed positive. There are still many examples that are proven, however, the important matter is that the surge of new coronavirus cases started since the loosening of large-scale social restrictions, thereby implicating that public gatherings such as religious gathering evidently increases the transmission of the virus.⁶

In South Korea, the wild gatherings among the religious people were also a factor that raised a variety of concerns. Since February 18, 2020, numerical cases of coronavirus have expanded more than thousands, followed by a number of deaths. Recent research done by Islam et al.² global spread of COVID-19 has drastically effected people’s lives and daily routines. According to the article, *Cults and Conservatives Spread Coronavirus in South Korea*, it states that this epidemic was derailed by the oldest of problems which are religion and politics.⁷ Pluses are the small amount of preparation where it gave us a glimpse of ideas due to the outbreak of MERS in 2015.

According to the National Evidence-based Healthcare Collaborating Agency in South Korea, one of the outbreaks that caught our attention throughout the beginning of 2020 was the religious group called ShinCheonji Church on February 17, 2020.⁸ The evidence we have gained from this was that the fatality rate of COVID-19 were also the “Wild Gatherings”. Because this “Wild Gathering” creates an “infectious” environment, the case of GwangHoon Jeon, who was a priest speaking to the world about the constitution violating the freedom of religion, carried negative narratives

without a doubt. One interesting feature that relates this “Wild Gatherings” would be Pastor Jeon Kwang-hoon’s commentary “I still don’t believe being positive in COVID”. His intervention in an interview and stating conspiracy theories during quarantine activated journalists to collect sufficient data to prove contrary aspects.

The records of the ShinCheonji Church activities gave us some numerical data. The infected population mostly appeared from women aged between 20~30. There were two similarities that were found from the studies above. First, there were clots found in the lungs of both lower quadrants. Second, those who died due to the COVID-19 either had COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) or were aged who carried pneumonia.

Amid the rapid increase in the number of patients with the coronavirus infection worldwide, many foreign media cited South Korea’s response toward COVID-19 as a “model” in one voice, stressing that other governments should use Korea as an example.⁹ Korea’s excellent defense capability factors by Belot include the early detection of individuals by developing and utilizing diagnostic equipment and tools within a week after the outbreak of Covid-patients, transparent disclosure of personal information, and the self-price practice.¹¹ The disclosure of personal information, self-isolation, and social-distance requires active cooperation from individuals, which in turn, proves that Koreans were clearly aware of the dangers of the coronavirus.

Another set of variables in Belot’s dataset shows that during the pandemic period, they were able to support those in need and continue to participate in religious services. In the latter case, in particular, considerable heterogeneity can be observed, with a marked 20 percent of respondents reporting that they have attended religious services at least once a week since the outbreak of the pandemic in their own countries. Despite the public’s apparent awareness of the dangers of coronavirus, the responses that people have attended religious gatherings shows that nevertheless the high probability of getting infected indicates that there seems to be a clear difference in the perception of the danger of coronavirus between religious and non-religious people. Therefore, National Evidence-based Healthcare Collaborating Agency states that there needs to be more thesis involved and published, and also a better protocol for the upcoming disaster.⁸

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research is to find out if religious people in Korea have different opinions about the risk and dangers of COVID-19 compared to non-religious people. we

have For our data source, To find out the underline assumption of the relationship between COVID-19 and religious belief we have collect primary data so that we can drill down our research question further. Having said that collected primary data using survey method was challenging. Due to strict restriction from the Korean government and possibility of getting infected while having face-to-face data collection. Lack of time and resources was some of the other constrains causes us to collect less sample. Reaching out to general population was tough due to pandemic we have decided to collect data in one of the top tier university campuses, called Yonsei University. Because we focused our sample population on university students in South Korea, the ages of our respondents range from 20 to 30 years. Thus, we did not bother to include the age section in the survey. The sampled students were given questionnaires (see Appendix 1) to provide their religious backgrounds and their thoughts on the COVID-19. It was sent out digitally via Google Form to various Korean universities in which the students could answer the survey via the Internet. Then, the responses were manually inputted into the data. The students were asked to complete the whole survey consisting of 10 questions anonymously.

The goal of the survey is to find out if there are any different views on COVID-19 between religious people and non-religious people. The questionnaire was purposely created for this research in order to collect the data on how religious a person was and how they felt about the COVID-19. Our survey method used the random Selection/Ratio Scale. The basic information about their gender and their religious affiliation were collected. Then, we added one part related to religion and another part about the COVID-19. We included six closed-ended questions scored on a 5-point scale. Three of the closed-ended questions were related to religion and the other three were related to the coronavirus. The objective of the religious questions and the COVID-19 questions is to gather how religious an individual is and how they feel about the COVID-19, respectively. Thus, once we have the range of non-religious people to religious people, we will be able to show the correlation between religion and their thoughts on the COVID-19 according to their responses on the survey.

RESULTS

A total of 92 valid samples were considered after eliminating few samples which were not properly answers and had few missing questions as well. Out of a total of 3-4 religious variables, we used the data that was collected with the following question from the survey, ‘How religious are you?’, and labeled it as ‘Religiosity’. Then, we used this variable and individually did a correlation test with each of the 4 main outcome variables (the COVID-19 variable): “Government restriction should increase”, “Not as dangerous as people think”, “Not as dangerous as news says”, and “How easy is it to contract COVID”.

For the difference-of-means tests, we did a median split between the respondents of those who had a religious score of 1 and those who had a score greater than 1. Apparently, half of the people answered 1 for the question, “How religious are you”, and the rest answered between 2-5. Then,

we organized all the information into a table (Table No. 1) and made individual plots for each correlation between religiosity vs COVID variables. It is important to note that we had discrete answers and thus, we used the ‘bubble plot’ instead of the scatter plot to illustrate the frequency of responses for each answer choice.

Table No. 1 Correlation results of the religiosity vs. COVID variables

| | Mean | | | Difference-of-means t-test | | | Correlation test | | |
|-----------------------------------|------|-----------|---------------|----------------------------|-------------|------|------------------|-------------|------|
| | All | Religious | Not Religious | Diff | 95% conf | p | r | 95% conf | p |
| Govt restrictions should increase | 4.21 | 4.18 | 4.24 | -.06 | -.42 to .28 | .702 | -.01 | -.21 to .19 | .920 |
| Not as dangerous as people think | 2 | 2.08 | 1.88 | .20 | -.27 to .68 | .389 | .18 | -.03 to .37 | .091 |
| Not as dangerous as news says | 1.92 | 2.06 | 1.76 | .30 | -.18 to .78 | .214 | .21 | .01 to .4 | .040 |
| How easy is it to contract COVID? | 3.68 | 3.84 | 3.49 | .35 | -.01 to .72 | .059 | .13 | -.07 to .33 | .207 |

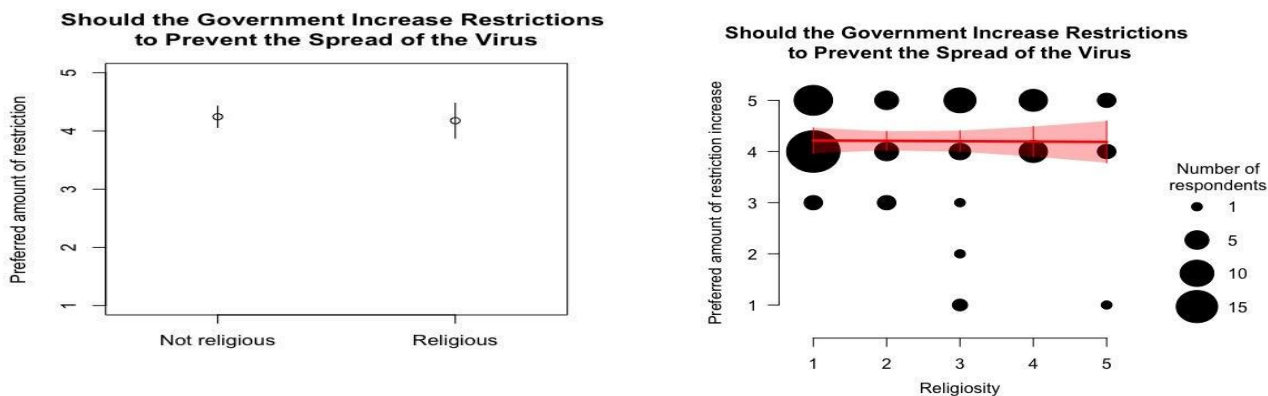


Fig 3. Should the Government Increase Restrictions to Prevent the Spread of the Virus

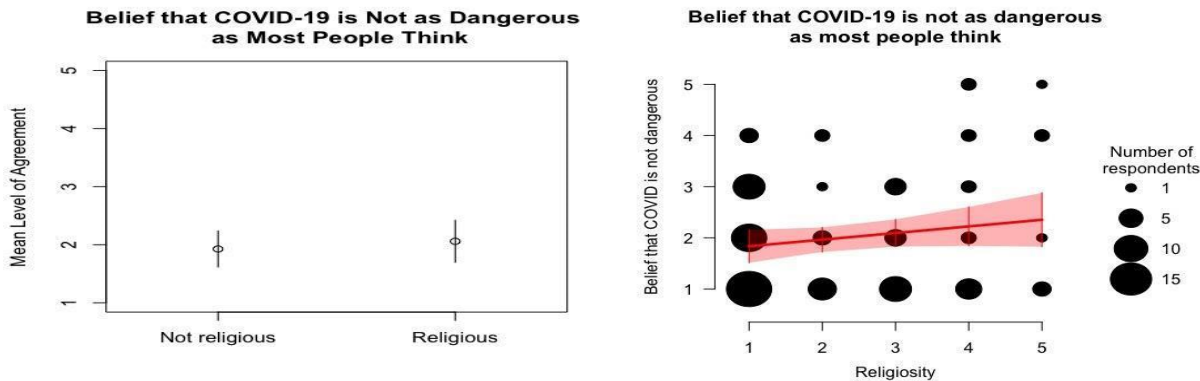


Fig 4. Belief that COVID-19 is Not as Dangerous as Most People Think

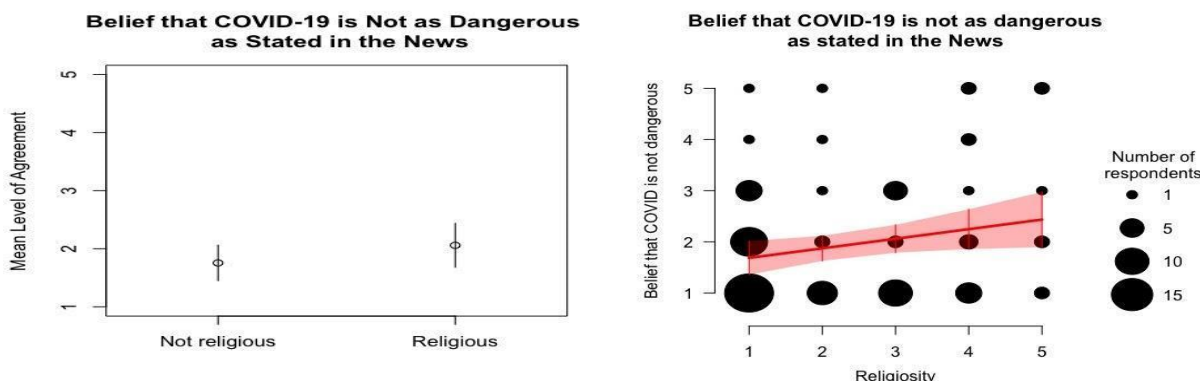


Fig 5. Belief that COVID-19 is Not as Dangerous as Stated in the News

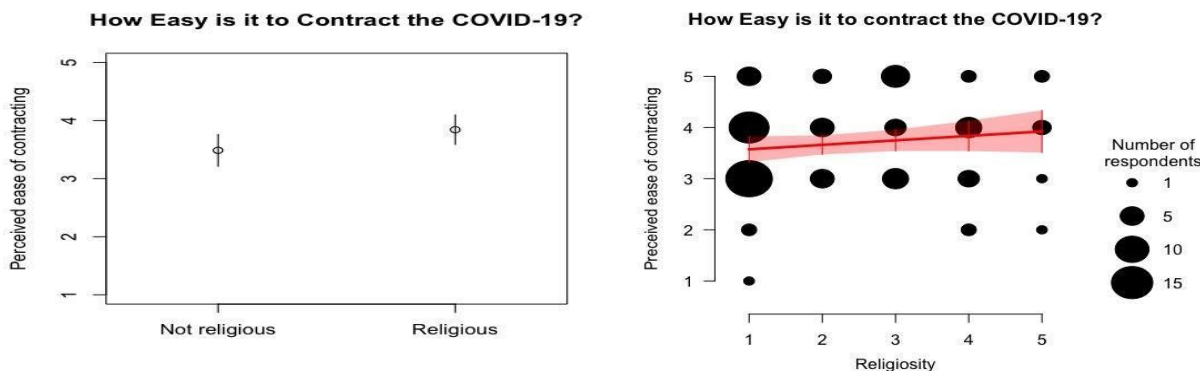


Fig 6. How Easy is it to Contract the COVID-19?

The figures show critical information for the relationship between religion and COVID-19. Figure 3 shows the correlation between religion and whether the government should increase the restriction to prevent the spread of the virus. Our results show that there is no significant correlation between the two variables since the results indicate that whether a person is religious or not, both religious and non-religious people wanted stronger restrictions from the government. This can be seen in Figure 3’s bubble plot, in which the red line is placed horizontally

on number 4 for “preferred amount of restriction increase”. This non-correlation is evident with the horizontal red line. Moreover, the fact that the trend line (given in red color) is placed in the top of the bubble plot demonstrates how most of our respondents chose “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement of wanting an increase in public restriction to prevent the spread of the COVID-19.

Figure 4 focuses on the relationship between religiosity and

the belief of how dangerous the coronavirus is. Unlike the result of Figure 3, we can see that the trend line is a slight positive slope in Figure 4's bubble plot, but again, this positive slope is not steep enough to claim that there is a correlation between religion and the belief of how dangerous the COVID-19 is. But Figure 5 shows an interesting finding.

In Figure 5, we can clearly see a positive slope for the relationship between religiosity and the belief of how dangerous the COVID-19 is according to the news. The respondents had to indicate how strongly they agreed with the following statement:

The COVID-19 is not as dangerous as stated in the news or the media.

From our result, we have found that people who are religious agreed to the above statement, meaning that the news was exaggerating the coronavirus pandemic. In other words, non-religious people had more trust in the news and perceived the COVID-19 as dangerous as how the news or the media stated. However, from our results, religious people held the belief that the coronavirus was not as dangerous as stated in the news and thus, could indicate as to why religious people were not as cautious in going to public places or holding social gatherings. However, this one correlation with our main religiosity variable and this one outcome variable cannot claim that our hypothesis was correct. We will explain further later in our paper.

Finally, in Figure 6, we have a similar result to our Figure 4 in which we can see a slight positive slope in the red line in the Figure 6's bubble plot. This result is quite interesting as religious people hold the belief that it is easier to contract the COVID-19 than what the non-religious people think. As shown on the left side of Figure 6, the result for non-religious people is slightly below the result for the religious people, in which both results are marked between 3 - 4. Thus, our result demonstrates how religious people somewhat agree that it is easy to contract the COVID-19, and that is also true for non-religious people.

DISCUSSION

Our result does not provide strong evidence to support our hypothesis that there is a strong correlation between religiosity and religious people's belief about the coronavirus. However, though our findings were not statistically significant, we can still observe from Table 1 that there is a slight positive relationship between the religiosity variable and the outcome variables "danger", "news", and "ease of contracting" having a correlation of 0.18, 0.21, and 0.13, respectively. This finding demonstrates that there is still a relationship between religiosity and the religious people's belief about the COVID-19. Nevertheless,

our result was not able to support our presumption may be because of the samples were taken from university students with young age group. This could be one of the main reasons we did not find strong significant relationship as modern days young generous might be religious with liberal outlook. What is important to note here that our results show slight significant relationship may be because we have collected data at the mid of pandemic when both religious and non-religious people understood the seriousness of COVID-19 and its effect. We believe if these data were collected at the initial stage of COVID-19 and from older age group then result may show strong relationship and may hold true and is in line with many of the findings from other literature.

The survey results from the "Research on the Religious Influence of COVID-19 and the Perception of Christianity by the General Public" by eight Korean religious news agencies strongly supports our hypothesis.¹² It showed that the majority of the people responded to the survey that the Protestants were misbehaving during the church gatherings, not complying with the church quarantine and infection-prevention rules, and not obeying the demands of the government and the society. Moreover, more respondents agreed with the statement that the state should restrict religious freedom even if it is going against what is stated in the Constitution. Months after the coronavirus outbreaks from religious gatherings, the Korean government has put greater effort in enlightening awareness of the pandemic, such as the implementation of the national emergency safety measure. The Korean government adjusted the emergency level according to the situation at hand. By doing this, more citizens, including the religious people who supported social gatherings, became more aware of the seriousness of the virus. Thus, the government's effort may have had a significant impact on the results of our study as well.

Furthermore, according to a similar study regarding religious people's perception on COVID-19, it asserts the same claim of our hypothesis which shows that religious people's degree of religion has strong correlation with COVID-19 in three different categories.¹³ First, the study showed that highly religious participants scored lower on coronavirus worry, indicating that there was no need for those people who had a high score to comply with the rules that restricted any of their mobility due to the COVID-19. Second, the study result showed that highly religious participants showed substantially more unreasonable behavior compared to participants with low religiosity, which comes from their emotionally-related somatic anxiety and thus, with religious people overreacting to their environment. Finally, the study showed a negative correlation with trust in scientific COVID-19 research, while it had a positive association with COVID-19-related conspiracy. This paper is consistent with our hypothesis that there is a correlation between religiosity and COVID-19. Therefore, it can be seen that many papers have

proven our hypothesis through their evidence.

CONCLUSION

Religious gatherings have become a major social issue in Korea, as a number of huge COVID-19 outbreaks occurred in these gatherings. These religious gatherings were made despite the government's regulations of social distancing. Our main hypothesis, which was to find out whether religious people have different views on social gatherings during COVID-19, was slightly supported with strong evidence. The results of the closed-end surveys and data analysis have shown that there is not much significant difference in awareness of COVID-19 between religious and non-religious people. Both have shown similar degrees of awareness of the disease and shown opinions towards the need of stronger measures for social distancing. Furthermore, it can be asserted that being religious does not have much correlation with having different views of social gatherings during the pandemic. In consequence, the number of religious participants or the depth of religiosity of our sample data did not show a straightforward answer.

LIMITATIONS

Like other papers, this paper also has limitations and restraints in getting clear and abundant data to support our claim. Furthermore, it is hard to make a definite statement as it is concluded with insufficient evidence. However, with only 92 responses we have received, it is possible to assume that being religious does not have any relevance with the level of awareness and to have opposing opinions regarding social gatherings during COVID-19. There were several main reasons for such differences between the hypothesis and the results. Since the survey only contained 92 respondents, it did not have enough samples to confirm the hypothesis. These small and narrow samples were mainly because the survey targeted only university students from Korea. The survey lacked the diversity in age groups, which means that it is insufficient for accurate data. Moreover, since the survey was conducted by students, it was difficult to use detailed and diverse methods to attract more respondents. In addition, there was not enough data to search about the correlation between religion and COVID-19. The data and resources that were commonly found were mostly from news and articles that do not have strong evidence to prove their hypothesis. Due to this lack of observation, the survey is weak in credibility, and thus needs new methods or questions to apply for more clear observation. Moreover, due to subjective thinking in religious trust issues, it was difficult to judge people's opinions through figures. Since every person has different standards for their religious beliefs, it would have been better if the survey contained more specific examples.

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