Psychology of Religion and Pandemic COVID-19 in KP, Islamic Republic of Pakistan

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Abstract

The psychology of religion is an investigation of what it means to be religious from a psychological standpoint. The main goal of the present study is to use a framework to understand how individuals and groups are contended with faith and religion in various ways during a pandemic situation. Empirical data critically reviewed and analyzed in this paper mainly focuses on religion, culture, and the pandemic. The first part of the paper reviews factors affecting religious beliefs in the social and cultural context. Overlapping themes are synthesized after reframing the data for the identification of helpful insights. Using Freud’s psychoanalysis theory of consciousness, the study analyses and unravels thoughts reflected in discourse to draw a conclusion that Freud’s theory is still an applicable tool in Asia to reach individuals’ minds and map their behavior for finding how the pandemic has affected religious in Muslim societies specifically KP region of Pakistan. Psychoanalysis proposes that unconsciousness makes emotions and expressions conscious. The unconscious governs the attitude of the people and in turn, influences their beliefs. The study concluded by finding that crises strengthened the beliefs to the extent of putting human lives in danger. A study can be conducted in the future to record female graduate and undergraduate participants’ responses to religious faith in the pandemic situation.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Religion, Pandemic, Covid-19, Conscious

Introduction:

Religion, Culture and Pandemic:

Religion particularly for Muslims is not a socio-cultural system to follow life and control behavior. Rather Muslims consider their religion to be the code within which their conduct, ethics, and morals are controlled.

Religion for human beings is divine, sacred, and absolute. Generally, all religions in the world
pave ways for human beings to exercise their morals and beliefs. Religion may be considered as a framework which potentially regulates values, character and almost all aspects of life. It, therefore, illuminates the social function of religion. It is religion which provides an insight into the social cohesion to maintain order in the society. Religion constructs a collective consciousness, which means it is not a construct of individual consciousness rather it gives expression to the collective consciousness of society. Research has shown that religion leads one to self-actualization. Religion explored by social scientists is instrumental in identifying mechanism of human happiness.

Religion Islam supports its claim of being divine on the basis of Holy Quran as the book is pure of all inconsistencies which could be found in any human work. Its evidence is found in Bible as well. Moreover, Islam is exceptional as it gives theory and asks for practice. Islam is understood in its stricter sense a social and cultural code which influences the society. It is worth mentioning here that its beliefs and practices also come under a strong impact of the geological, sociological and political upheavals. Out of all the external forces of nature, religion is closely understood within the constraints of natural calamities and disasters; more specifically epidemics and the kind of outbreaks due to ecological changes.

If we look at the records of history, epidemics have been associated to God’s wrath on earth. Bubonic plague in China during 14th century and Black Death in England during 15th century reported people practicing religion for safety against diseases. Long before that plague in Athens and Greece were regarded as wrath of gods against low morality of Athenians. Afterwards Antonine plague (presumably small pox) developed the same reaction in Rome. Apolo Alexikakos (God of averting evils) was worshipped and pleaded for cure. Plague of Cyprus broke at a time when Rome was averting to Christianity in the hope of eternal redemption. The plague implied polite and kind manners in which Christians looked after the plague-stricken community. Response to plagues in Muslims societies remained unintelligible. Ibn-e-Sina is reported to have been the first advocate of social distancing. Those Muslim scholars viewed the plagues as “Allah’s will”, however, they gave equal importance to observe and understand the nature as well as spread of the disease. Contagious nature of plague was compatible to the interpretation of Quran, which revealed that stability in nature’s pattern was quite often disturbed by events such as natural disasters. In addition, those assumptions strengthened their belief system and adherence to God and the Holy Book. Despite all claims, Ibn-e-Khaldun’s book *Muqaddimah* reported “lack of
quarantine in Islamic world spanning between Morocco and Indonesia. The attitude proved “fatalist” in contrast to measures developed by the European world. Sun, Deng and Qi (2018) conducted a study to understand the impact of religion on individuals’ responses to natural disasters. The study addressed the issue of how people in a religious setup interpret natural calamities and controls their behaviors while perceiving risk. Secondly, the study focused how religion is considered as a support and survival strategy when confronted with physical and emotional injuries. The study found religion supportive in psychological crises as religion ties individuals and groups to each other. However, the study did not focus on a pandemic situation when social distancing appears to be the only legitimate solution. Therefore, a constructive effort is inevitable to moderate religious beliefs when they create obstacles.

Bentzen (2019) asserted that religious beliefs directly control human behavior. The reason was a positive effort on part of the individuals to deal intolerable and uncertain events of their lives. Bentzen (2019) questioned ‘global differences in religiosity’ (p. 2295). The findings asserted individuals’ religiosity getting more intense at a time of natural calamity. Moreover, the study highlighted ‘coping’ of religion which provided foundation to religiosity far from being a vanishing phenomenon.

**Why Pakhtun Society?**

History also reflects Kushana (modern day Peshawar, KP Pakistan), which sought help of Buddhist goddess Hariti to sway the fever that caused scars on skins (Rowan, 2002). The attitude remains the same in the contemporary Pakistani society in the wake of pandemic. Rituals combined with medical practices are exercised for healing purposes. In Muslim societies particularly, illness has strongly been linked to religion. Recent situation during pandemic Corona created havoc around the world affecting KP region of Pakistan to a greater extent.

This research has considered Pakhtun society of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan as its context for arguments and discussion on Pakhtun in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa since they have been closely linked to fundamentalist religious beliefs during recent decades. Their involvement in Jihad and Afghan war has highlighted them as flag holders of religious principles. Islamic values suffuse effectively in KP society to an extent of wrapping them within the fabric of extremism and fundamentalism. Though religion is an individual’s personal matter, however, group consciousness is a crucial part of its beliefs to create harmony in the society. During lockdown, pandemic posed challenges to the very existence of human life. Since religion preaches close social relationships, the idea of social
distancing was likely to create disturbance and poignancy.

In severe crises such as pandemics, priorities change from defending civil freedom to the protection and perseverance of national health as well as social order. However, societies following strict religious codes of conduct such as KP, Pakistan is troubled and finds it hard to reconcile change in collective social lives. It denies seriousness and severity of pandemic and shows resentment to those temporary limitations which it claims to be a civil entitlement.

Generally observed, KP, Pakistan is a social environment which refused the concept of social distancing. Life in quarantine is translated ‘within the idioms’ of religion. However, it created anxiety, abuse, and depression. Majority of the people in Pakistani cultural context have taken the pandemic as ‘Wrath of God’ inflicted upon the world for sins and crimes. Virtual relationship was refused immediately and religious practices were geared to ask forgiveness from the creator.

Objectives:

1. To critically analyze how individuals and groups engrossed in their Islamic beliefs in KP, Pakistan, receive pandemics.
2. To examine the effects of pandemic on religious beliefs.

Research Questions:

1. How do individuals and groups engrossed in their Islamic beliefs in KP, Pakistan receive pandemics?
2. What are the effects of pandemic on religious beliefs?

Research Method:

The present study examines the effects of pandemic on religion. It aims to understand ‘religiosity’ in Pakistani society. For the matter, it conducted a case study of the Pakhtun social environment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during the pandemic Corona. The tools used for collecting data were interviews and observation. Observation as a tool is significant for the study as the researcher herself is a participant of Pakhtun society. The study also addresses the social behavior of individuals and groups broadcast on electronic media with reference to religion.

This study focuses the findings of interviews in the context of religion and culture. Approximately twenty structured interviews were conducted: five interviewees were uneducated individuals from a village; five individuals belonged to urban setting with no educational background. Five individuals were university professionals holding M.Phil. degree in Social Sciences. Five
interviews of religious scholars were selected from media during pandemic lockdown. Selection was random. Interviews were in Urdu language, as in Pakistan Urdu is spoken and understood at national level. Relevant themes were identified using labels. Interviewees were contacted through personalized invitation to individuals and assigned task to one family member to conduct interview in the village and city. The researcher herself interviewed the university employees due to her possible access in professional capacity. The researcher has used pseudonyms and masked identifiable details to maintain research ethics confidentiality of the university in particular. From the responses gathered through the interviews, common themes were identified. Interviews were focused to see effects of pandemic on religion in KP, Peshawar, Pakistan. Questions were open-ended to extract the speaker’s perception of pandemic and its relevance to religious faith. The questions particularly explored ritualistic conventions, perception of God at a time of disaster, instructions by the religion during natural calamities, social responsibility at community level and religious obligations.

The study presents a nuanced critical analysis within the theoretical framework of Freud’s theory of consciousness. It explored how individuals and groups in KP, Pakistan, engrossed in their Islamic beliefs receive pandemics. During six months of observations and interviews, the findings demonstrated that the respondents’ perceptions of pandemic were informed by multiple moral and ethical beliefs within the constraints of Islam. For respondents, cultural practices were informed by religious interpretations. However, the study concluded in finding that crises strengthened the beliefs to an extent of putting human lives in danger.

**Theoretical Framework:**

Human conscious has three levels of consciousness namely conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious; each level corresponding to Freud's conception of the id, ego, and superego (1924). Id consists of the primary drives and emotions; ego is the mediator reminding the individuals not to act in socially unacceptable ways whereas super ego depicts sense of morality. Psychological forces underlying human behaviour and emotions are overpowered by beliefs and faiths in the contemporary world. Beliefs are disguised in Id were ego i.e., religious interpretations compel individuals to compromise and present a sociably accepted face fulfilling the standards of morality. Here the groups and individuals blend religion with morality. Both become overlapping in their lives where rituals hold a strong position driving groups and individuals according to the socio-cultural canons blurring the actual position of religion.
Discussion:
Effects of Pandemic on Religion:
The role of religion in Pakistani society is explicitly reflected in all facets of life. Moreover, religion in itself has various aspects such as, internal and external, individual and social (Nath 2015, p. 83). These aspects exhibit emotional feature closely related to ‘religious consciousness’ (Nath 2015 p. 83). Rituals and rites are the practical exercise of this consciousness. Religious practices are external facets claimed to be its foremost characteristic. Furthermore, religious practices at community level are integral parts of religious faith and its strength (Blackmar & Gillin 1921). Social life is governed/controlled by religion and its institutions in domestic, economic, and political spheres. Most of the time social life is influenced to an extent to be threatened by these institutions. Various practices such as congregational prayers are ways adopted for close social interaction. These gatherings provide source to individuals to express their religious feelings. Apart from worship gatherings, marriage, birth, death, harvesting, all such activities are performed under strong influence of religious practices. To say extremity in religious practices has turned people superstitious to the limit that on every step, they look to religious omens to guard and protect them.

Where religion Islam teaches love and peace to human beings, its followers have misused it to appropriate their own purposes, to meet their ends/goals. Unfortunately, the image of religion and God is associated more with fear and wrath rather than kindness, mercy and forgiveness. Such feelings have led the Pakistani society to develop into a symbol of extremism and terror. Individuals fail to understand that religion ensures meaning to life.

Covid-19 disrupted the normal religious practices in Pakistan. However, an explicit hype was observed in religious attitude of the individuals as well as at community level. Though religious impact cannot be readily modeled, however, effects of pandemic can clearly be seen through observance of religious rituals basically carried out in response to pandemic.

In Pakistan, response to pandemic is harmonizing the retrospective role of religion against the milieu of a restructuring global order which was disordered and led to social disorientation. Moreover, the pandemic exposed global preparedness in the wake of a natural disaster. The irregular, grievous effect of novel coronavirus on Muslim community in KP, Pakistan reflects symptom of a wider, profound pandemic of inequality in social structure. Religious scholars have frequently pointed out the imbalance in social structure of Pakistani society, which has led to
unemployment detention, insecurity and equal economic opportunity, which has caused damage to the well-being and health.

What should be the prevailing theory of religion during pandemic? Although religious scholars have a pivotal role to play in scaffolding attitudes of individuals to keep social harmony, however, moral aptitudes dissolve when the community malfunctions. Covid situation reopened an opportunity to consider what cultural practices are conventionally fabricated in religion. Pandemic also provided an opportunity to have a robust understanding of religion.

The concerns about future of religion are a crucial and integral part of contemporary research to explore religious institutions, which need to mitigate the disparities and move to a comprehensive understanding of religion and its role in society.

At large, insecure individuals are undergoing practices of religious faith, which finds no credibility as for its origin is concerned. Perhaps this is an opportunity to envision religion with a new horizon.

**Covid-19 Pandemic and Religious Rituals:**

Much has been researched on the origin of novel coronavirus, its spread, and possible preventions. Scientists referred to it as another type of SARS-2 related to acute respiratory syndrome. Bat is considered to be the primary carrier and source of its spread, however, its transfer to human body is still an enigma (Wang 2020).

Information has been established of its rapid spread (WHO April 18th, 2020). Pandemic has caused physical as well as psychological damage to people. Apart from economy and health, it has demobilized religious faith. To restrict transmission of coronavirus, along with scientific solutions Muslim societies urged their citizens to change their rituals by following social distancing at community religious places. However, restrictions of congregations caused a strong turmoil in KP society. Many Muslim countries observed strict SOPS to avoid contact among people. KP, being a staunch traditional society adhered to its religious stances and individuals bluntly refused to consider Islamic teachings at the time of pandemic. Along with economic and regional instability, pandemic destabilized religious belief as well affecting psychology of people.

Seemingly a secular age around the globe, Muslim societies are still prevalent with strong faith in religious practices. People grow more anxious about life after death during pandemic and they hold those deities strongly, which offer them patronage in life during pandemic in this world and beyond.

Lack of seriousness for a quarantine life in Pakistani society, however, increased the consciousness
of God’s ways. Consciousness or awareness ‘characterized by a special kind of unity, on account of which it does not tolerate gaps of any kind’. Conflict between consciousness and unconsciousness ‘is not regarding their position but because of the particular character of the contents of unconsciousness and their consequent connection with repression’ (Wollheim, 1973). A social reformation might well be expected in such societies when secularism has prevailed upon around the globe. Feeling that we are abandoned by God, constructs new ‘absurdism’, giving meaning to life and its protection. Socially, a renewed strength in religious deities foretelling of Doomsday and logics to protect others by protecting oneself gained momentum during corona pandemic. A strong theological Muslim society may emerge to eliminate its opposite and contrasting views. To say, a theologian revolution is coming across is not far from being true. Faith is rewired. Muslim society in KP, Pakistan has faced constraints as majority of the population is living in rural areas with orthodox religious notions. Adherents of Islam believe in the cure of Covid-19 lies more in prayer than any other preventive measure. The situation is more like ‘solution-aversion’.

**Perception of God and Natural Disaster:**

The study found the most common response of all the interviewees was ‘if God wills’, ‘it is God’s will’, ‘God’s wrath’, God’s punishment’, which revealed extreme religious consciousness and its practical association to a natural disaster afflicted on human beings. Ten interviewees (uneducated rural and urban) explicitly started their answers within the religious context. At one point they intermingled religious belief and cultural practice e.g., ‘handshake’. ‘How can a Muslim stop handshake. It is Sunnah’ (following the Prophet). ‘Social isolation is western agenda’. These were general opinions of ten uneducated (rural and urban) individuals. Their answers asserted refusal of western and media propaganda about the coronavirus. ‘Death is inevitable’, ‘death is the reality’ rose as common expressions from this group of individuals. It lent a pseudo air of bravery and courage to their faith. The researcher also traced that socio-economic status of the interviewees was clearly reflected in their conversations.

Approach of the common individuals of comparatively humble economic background towards religion is diverse. In Pakistani society, particularly in KP, individuals translate religion within the cultural context. One interviewee explained that pandemic was the ‘trap’ set to harm the Muslim unity by China and USA. China is commonly understood as ‘friend’ in Pakistan. However, there are people who opinionate China as yet another ‘usurper’ who is interested in Pakistani region as
East India Company did under the covering of trade. Another individual explicitly stated that social isolation concept was to refrain Muslims from religious practices. His assumption was that since religion is prevalent in social setup saying ‘being able to bring Muslims closer to each other through congregational prayers…handshake…embracing’.

“As a Pakhtoon, I have seen miracles happening. It is the wrath of God inflicted due to our sins”. The confidence level of the interviewee reflects his staunch belief; hence, it may be assumed that pandemic strengthened faith. It clearly demonstrated that no natural calamity can shake faith, instead it is strengthened. One individual, who lived in urban area, claimed ‘God was watching all on earth’. Here, cautiousness may be related to the social behavior of individuals embedded within the religious context.

Referring to the theoretical underpinnings of this study, it can be inferred that the primitive and instinctual part of the human mind defined ‘id’, which involves aggressive drives. For decades, Muslims are equated with extremism in terms of religion and culture and their Islamic ideology is closely associated with aggression driving Muslims towards fanaticism. Extremism outsources ideology as its driving force. During pandemic, in KP society, a usual and expected integration of culture and religion constructed an unusual and indifferent social attitude irrespective of the religion’s instructions and obligations in the face of a calamity such as pandemic.

**Social Psychology and Religion:**

A significant label singled out in the interview transcription is the social psychology identified through overlapping themes in each interviewee’s talk. Each individual’s talk carried significance within the social context. Individuals with no educational background reflected more prompt answers irrespective of gender and class. They focused religion more. As far as individuals holding higher educational degrees relatively focused many perspectives such as social and individual security, family concerns, status, and most of all gender supremacy. The process related to ‘Ego’ from psychoanalytic perspective where ego represents individual or collective consciousness. A central emotional response of individuals during lockdown was fear. ‘Fear of God’ was the opinion of uneducated (rural and urban) individuals. Among the M Phil graduates, the fear was translated as ‘test of God’, ‘environmental pollution’, ‘population increase’, and ‘hygiene’.

Participants from rural background particularly associated the virus inflicted by God on ‘non-believers’. Here it is crucial to mention that faith and religion has an inevitable connection with food in Pakistani Muslim society. People in KP, Pakistan are particularly conscious about ‘Halal’
(permitted) and ‘Haram’ (forbidden) food. Knowing the origin of corona virus at large in Wuhan, China market and bats being the primary source, KP, people justified their rationale by asserting that the spread of the virus was caused by eating ‘Haram food’. Additionally, they felt contented that God protected them as they had always kept themselves away from such ‘Haramkhori’ (eating forbidden food). Many rural and urban participants linked it to the ‘eating of forbidden fruit’ by Adam for which he and his wife were punished. Response of the graduated, however, differed as they understood the contagious nature of virus; though they also associated ting of religious interpretation to it by calling it virus ‘inflicted by nature who can cure it if He desires’. Preventive measures were also granted as important and the only means through which God might help. Since the graduates had knowledge about what religion said in times of pandemic, they preferred to stay home during lockdown and appreciated government plans of lockdown. M. Phil graduates discussed ‘threat’ and ‘fear’ only if social distancing was strictly observed. Government and media’s frequent announcements targeted the fear and threat in their advertisement policy. Research has shown that targeting fear is helpful in emergency situations (Bavel, Baicker & Willer 2020, p. 462). Appeal to fear may compel people to change their behaviour in order to make ‘defensive responses’ (Bavel et al., 2020). Moreover, a belief in unfortunate and evil things befalling more on other i.e., optimism-bias’ (Bavel et al., 2020) release negative feelings but people are more likely to suffer as a result of underrating a disease (Sharot, 2011). The situation turns alarming for the general public health (Wise & Zbozinek 2020). Graduate participants of the study executed ‘anxiety’ and ‘terror’ by the communicating strategies of media and government, however, five individuals from rural background defined these as ‘scrap’ and western agenda, ‘China’s agenda to rule the world, Chinese conspiracy against the world’. Graduated participants defined the situation in terms of biological war. All the participants exhibited a collective consciousness of the situation and agreed on one point that there was ‘some conspiracy going on part of China and America.

Emotions involve ‘risk perceptions and individuals deny facts. However, such emotional responses cause negativity when individuals expect negativity. The congruent information in such situations drive individuals into more negativity and they are likely to spend more time in examining hazards. In KP, Pakistan, almost all participants relied more on negative information for taking their decisions.

**Pandemic and the Psychology of Religious Rituals:**

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Another significant theme found was the rituals and religious obligations performed during social interaction within and out of family life. In KP, Pakistan these are explicit and observable. Twelve out of twenty interviewees demonstrated high perception of rituals that ensured unity and strength to community life. Freud explained “superego” of an individual or group carrying higher principles and morality motivating people for socially and morally acceptable conduct (McLeod, 2013). However, for individuals or group, to give a true account of emotions is difficult as per Freudian perspective. It may be called self-deception.

Participants of the present research demonstrated the above stated situation in the sense that their attitude was more “solution aversion”; averting to the solution of the problem. Their religious beliefs, so strongly ingrained in their minds, fabricated within cultural norms that motivated them to avoid social distancing. One participant among uneducated rural individuals expounded social distancing as “kufr” (non-believing) because religion asked Muslims for hand shake. It implied that the segregation is not possible in society until its members take the initiative to acquire a thorough understanding of religion to make an effort to improve the condition of their community. Another common theme was the interviewees’ motivational attitude aroused by the community mosque cleric. Though religious scholars on media pleaded Pakistani citizens to follow the instructions explained vividly by the prophet during a pandemic situation, however, individuals followed the instructions given by the respective cleric. Ten interviewees, with no educational background, displayed extreme agitation for “locking the mosques”. When asked about Saudi Arabia strategy, they referred to closing of “Ka’aba as Yahoodi sazish” (Jews conspiracy).

The study implied that repetitive and patterned behavior responded variously to disaster. Individuals as well as groups communicating within a deity generally associate natural calamities to supernatural powers and mostly reject any human intervention during such situations. Respondents of the study (rural and urban background) preferred loud announcements of ‘azan’ (call for prayers) from their roof tops. ‘Azan’ is a ‘fixed self-evident’ ritual of Muslims meant to announce time of prayers (Welt 2005, p.5). During lockdown, in KP Peshawar people practiced the ritual in an unconventional way by making it any time of the day to call for God’s mercy on earth though the call is limited to five specific times of the day; dawn to dusk. The exercise created an enormous influence on the people’s religious faith, however, religious scholars in Peshawar and across the country denounced the practice conflating it with ‘bida’at’ (innovation in faith). This confirmed Islam does not promote practices merely to fabricate a religious custom. Media called
it a ‘trend’; an unlikely term translating sacred rituals into contemporary fashion. ‘Azan’ has never been a trend but an obligatory announcement practiced daily with zeal for performing prayers. However, such a practice denotes repentance on part of Muslims at a time when the entire world failed to offer a cure to corona virus. M.Phil. graduate participants denounced the exercise clearly though they all favored compliance to repentance from God. Religious and emotional association to Mecca and Madina cities in Saudi Arabia also compelled Muslims in KP Peshawar to call for mercy and forgiveness. Individuals from rural area linked it to a conspiracy of the West for shutting down the holy cities and restrain Muslims from performing Hajj rituals. The entire discourse endorsed the belief system of KP Peshawar. ‘Between me and my God’ concurrently heard along ‘azan’ became a symbol of redemption. It is evidently an exemplary situation to refer to Freud’s interpretation of individual and group consciousness.

**Religious Dimension of Coping:**

Freud defined the segment of mind ‘superego’ which is occupied by morality and higher principles. It persuades individuals and groups to perform in socially and morally acceptable ways (McLeod, 2013). Superego in the present study addresses to the fact how religion in third world countries becomes instrumental leading people to make decisions making them upright or prone to vices. During pandemic, lockdown restrictions on congregational prayers constructed an impression of conspiracy inflicted upon Muslim world by the non-Muslim. Rural areas demonstrated a worst situation. Groups outrageously refused to comply. Body language of all the respondents of the study showed firmness and robustness of faith. One respondent, an illiterate individual, called it ‘asli waqt’ (accurate time), the real moment to show gratitude to Allah and ask for forgiveness. ‘Religious practice offers the only beacon of hope during natural disaster’, reflected one M. Phil. graduate. It undermines the role of science, however, the situation pertained to the idea of superego, which illustrated that religious faith in the third world country specifically Pakistan was instrumental leading people to make decisions.

**Conclusion:**

The research found by and large that in conservative society such as KP, Pakistan, controlling a pandemic situation is far difficult than it is in European societies. Reasons are numerous; population, poverty, education and a strict institutionalized interpretation of religion. However, faith gains strength in such situations and excels every other thought. Muslim faith gained renewal, energy and acceleration during pandemic. It did not only strengthen the belief system but also
revitalized family concerns. KP Peshawar moving towards one-unit family system, said one M. Phil respondent, regained its traditional spirit. M. Phil graduates endorsed that their own family concerns along with religious faith grew more tolerant and affectionate in an overwhelming consumerist world. In future a study can be conducted to record responses of the females about the subject matter.

References:


