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Cyberchondria and Health Anxiety During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

- Bagarić and Jokić-Begić (2019) found that 70% of people use the internet as their first consultant in regard to questions about their health
- Sensationalized internet reports were a risk factor for stress during SARS pandemic (Jungmann & Witthöft, 2020)
- Cyberchondria is excessive health-related Internet searching that is associated with emotional stress (Jungmann & Witthöft, 2020)
- Health-related searching on the internet can lead to an increase in anxiety due to terrifying information found (Starcevic et al., 2020)
- Health anxiety is characterized by bodily distress due to perceived physical sensations where there is no pathology available (Rask et al., 2020)

Research Question

How has the COVID-19 pandemic's influence on cyberchondria affected levels of health anxiety?

Hypothesis

When a person engages in cyberchondria behaviors, specifically related to COVID-19, their levels of health anxiety will significantly increase.

Variables

- Cyberchondria Scale (Bjornsen et al., 2020)
- Short Health Anxiety Inventory (SHAI, Abramowitz, Deacon, & Valentiner, 2007)

Method

Participants

- Total of 45 participants collected from SONA
- Survey A (N = 22)
- Survey B (N = 23)

Procedure

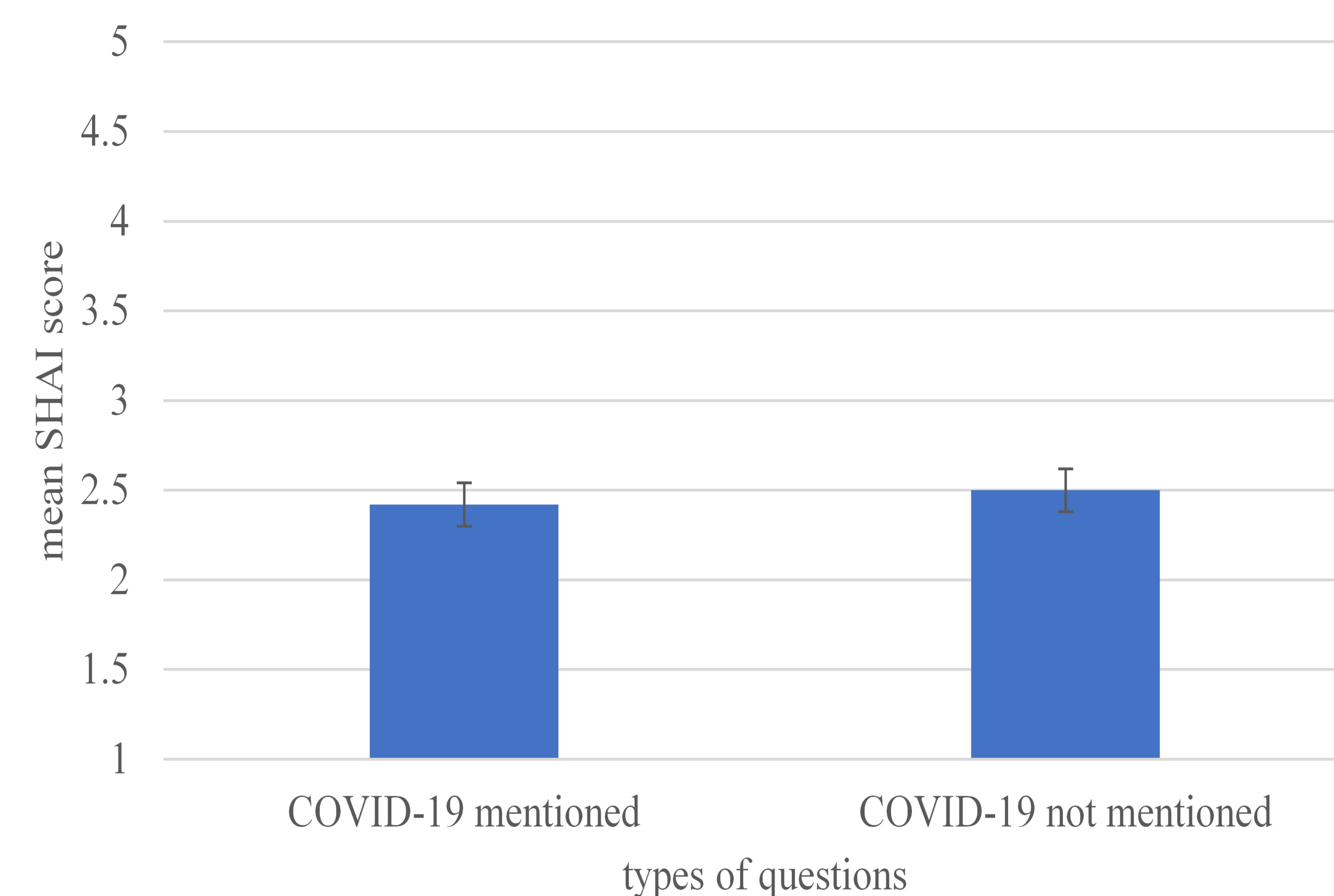
- Participants signed up for either survey A or B on SONA systems and took the survey on Survey Monkey
- Survey A contained the original 6 item cyberchondria scale and the 18 item SHAI
- Survey B contained the modified cyberchondria scale and the 18 item SHAI. Modified to mention COVID-19
- Both surveys contained a manipulation check – “Did you see any questions pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic?” – and collected demographic information

Results

- Participants did not report different levels of health anxiety for both types of questions asked, $t(43) = .429$, $p = 0.670$, two-tailed (see Fig 1).

Figure 1

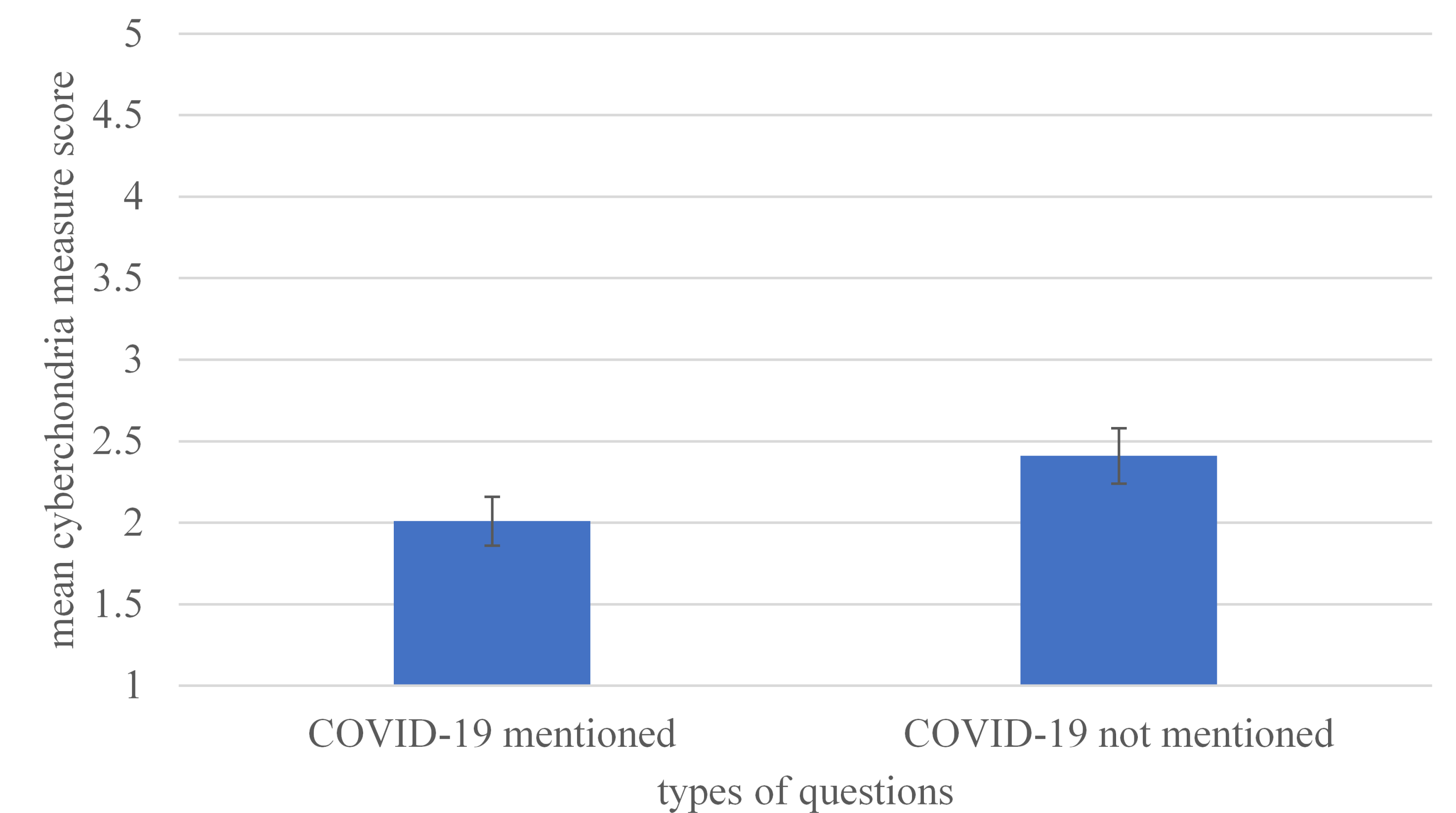
Mean SHAI Score for the Types of Questions Asked



- Participants reported similar levels of cyberchondria behavior for both types of questions asked, $t(43) = 1.72$, $p = 0.093$, two-tailed (see Fig 2).

Figure 2

Mean Cyberchondria Measure Scores for the Types of Questions Asked



Discussion

- Results suggest that the pandemic has not effected cyberchondria behaviors and so there is no effect on health anxiety
- This is contradictory to the literature
- An recent increase in focus on mental health could have mediated the negative effects of the virus on health anxiety
- There was an increase in health-related searching, but it was only temporary (Bento et al., 2020)
- Major limitations:
 - Small sample size and time constraints
 - Many failed manipulation checks for survey A
- Future research should:
 - conduct a similar study after the pandemic
 - explore levels of honesty during distressing times
 - explore levels of health anxiety and cyberchondria in countries that handled the pandemic differently

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