

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LIFE OF YOUNG ADULTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

The SARS-Cov-2 coronavirus and COVID-19 pandemic has disordered peoples' everyday life due to the extended measures of transmission restriction. For "young adults", that is for people in the age range between 19-24, the impact of pandemic may be of greater importance, given that this early years of adulthood is a critical stepstone for their further social and emotional development. Thus, it is interesting to focus on them during those hard times. The aim of the study was to investigate the views of young adults, firstly, on their social life and its disruption due to the coronavirus and, secondly, on their emotional life. In this context, a quantitative research has been conducted based on a questionnaire, that has been designed by the research team. The questionnaire included 37 questions (likert, open ended, and multiple choice). The study was conducted via internet and in total 285 young individuals have participated. Regarding the main results of our study, it was found that watching movies seem to have a positive effect in help passing time and coping with boredom. Regarding the impact of pandemic on participants' emotional life, it was found that during lockdown, fear -specifically fear for the future and fear for their beloved ones- was the feeling mainly experienced by the young adults. It is notable that after the lockdown the fear of the future and the fear for the beloved ones is still a dominant feeling. Moreover, it was found that social and emotional impact go hand by hand. Specifically, it was also found that, controlling for age effect, participants' after lockdown feelings such as stress, sorrow and fear for their beloved were associated to whether entered University before or during pandemic. A holistic view of social and emotional impact of pandemic, challenges emerged for young adults who faced extended restrictions and implications of our results will be discussed.

Keywords: *COVID-19, young adults, social-emotional life.*

1. Introduction

People's everyday life has changed due to the SARS-Cov-2 coronavirus and COVID-19 disease that caused the extended measures of transmission restriction (Alzueta et al., 2021). Humanity all over the world had to face the rapid changes along with the personal challenges, that seem to be of great difficulty, both psychologically and physically (Violant-Holz et al., 2020). One of the most important protection measures towards COVID-19 globally, is physical distancing (Aminnejad & Alikhani, 2020). Governments restricted any public or private activity that would cause crowds and thus, possible high levels of transmission, in order to achieve this (BBC News, 2020).

Many recent researches focus on the emotional effects that COVID-19 and lockdown had caused to people in different countries around the world (Gismero-González et al., 2020; Gittings et al., 2021; Shukla et al., 2021). Thus, an increased interest is noticed around the social and emotional consequences of COVID-19 and the quarantine periods in young adults (Green et al., 2021; Shanahan et al., 2020). In addition, many researches focus on specific groups of young people that appear to be more vulnerable, as they are considered to face more challenges in their everyday life than others (Jones, 2020). Some health domains that are associated with vulnerability are disability, chronic illness, chronic medical conditions, etc. (The American Journal of Managed Care, 2006).

As young people seem to be able to bring social change (UNICEF, 2000), it is interesting to focus on them during those hard times. Individuals in the age range between 18-24 belong to the phase of late adolescence and are characterized as "young adults" (University of Minnesota, 2022). At this age, humans experience changes and develop important traits, such as the ability to make independent decisions about their beliefs and values, and, in relation with other people, the interest they show in others (Arnett, 1994).

Young adulthood seems to be a complex period of time, due to the fact that young adults may face challenges that are connected to the start of the university life, such as a variety of different emotions (Christie, et al., 2008) and the possibility of homesickness, especially in younger ages (Thurber & Walton, 2012). Moreover, researchers have focused on correlations between the social and emotional changes of this time, along with problems that may arise during the early years of adulthood, such as substance use in daily life (Papp & Kouros, 2021), or the negative effects of social media use (Ngien & Jiang 2021). However, young adults appear to use social media in their everyday life for socialization purposes (Niland, et al., 2015).

In parallel, during COVID-19 time the entertainment field has received important limitations and adaptations (Moon, 2020). Home entertainment activities seem to offer a safe alternative, as people could avoid physical contact with others and stay in their homes. In order to entertain themselves during the lockdown periods, people can choose among surfing online, watching movies or TV, and many other choices (Kim et al., 2021). Furthermore, researches show that lockdowns are connected to negative emotions and young people tend to use media as a try to cope with these negative emotions (Cauberghe, et al., 2021).

2. Aim of the study – Research questions

The aim of the study was to research the views of young adults, firstly, on their social life and its disruption due to the coronavirus and, secondly, on their emotional life. Specifically, to achieve this purpose, the following research questions were formulated:

- a) Was there a difference on the emotions young adults have felt during and after lockdown?
- b) Has “watching movies” as a leisure activity helped young adults to deal with negative emotions?
- c) Have students entered university during pandemic felt more negative emotions compared to students entered university before pandemic?

3. Methodology

The present study employs quantitative research methodology which is widely used to provide information for a large number of people, as a representative of a population. It is appropriate to investigate social phenomena by processing numerical data through statistical analysis in an objective way (Watson, 2015). Through quantitative analyses and statistical techniques, conclusions are drawn with the ultimate goal of interpreting the perceptions and expectations of the respondents.

3.1. Participants

The sample has been collected randomly via online questionnaire that has been distributed through the administration of the Universities. A total of 285 people participated, aged 19 to 23. Two hundred and fifty people identified as women (87.7%), 34 as men (11.9%), and one as “other” (0.4%). Moreover, 215 of them seem to depend financially on their parents (75%), while 49 (17.2%) accept parental support and work at the same time. Two broad groups were identified according to the year enter the University. Specifically, we identified a group of 153 young adults (54,1%) first entered University before 2020, that is before pandemic named "before pandemic students, (BPS)", and a group of 130 young adults (45,9%) entered University during pandemic named "first year students in pandemic (FYSP)".

3.2. Procedure – Data analysis -ethics

The study was conducted during the pandemic via internet only, to ensure the safety of the participants. A google form questionnaire was created and the link was posted online. The collected data were encoded and analysed through the statistical package of SPSS 22.0, frequencies and percentages were calculated for the questionnaire items and analysis of variance and t-tests were computed to check the differences between the SLC and NSLC groups. The research was approved by the Committee for Research Ethics of the University of Macedonia.

3.3. Instrumentation

A tailor-made questionnaire with 37 items, including Likert-scale, open ended and multiple choice questions, was specially designed by the research team. All of the above types of questions appear in numerous surveys and social research studies (i.e., De Vaus & De Vaus, 2013). The questionnaire consists of 3 parts: Part A (6 questions) focuses on demographics of the participants. In Part B, participants are asked to answer questions about changes in their daily life due to the pandemic (17 items) and in part C (14 items) on issues related to accessibility issues brought about by the pandemic restrictive

measures. The present paper focuses on the questions related to the emotions of the participants and the leisure activity “watching movies” and its effect on dealing negative emotions during lockdown. The online questionnaire has been chosen due to the limitations of the pandemic.

3.4. Reliability

The reliability of the scales measured with Cronbach’s Alpha are for the

- Emotions during quarantine, $\alpha=.833$
- Watching movies, $\alpha=.873$ and
- Emotions about the Covid-SARS-19, $\alpha=.800$

4. Results

This exploratory study aims to highlight the social-emotional life of young adults. More specifically, this paper focuses on the results related to the emotions of young adults during and after lockdown as well as their habits. Concerning the emotions young adults felt during and after lockdown it was found that one of the most important emotions the participants felt during lockdown, according to their answers, is fear for the future ($M: 3,88$, $SD: 1,14$) and fear for their beloved ones ($M: 4,02$, $SD: 1,13$). After the lockdown the fear of the future and the fear for the beloved ones seem to stay in the same levels ($M: 3,95$, $SD:1,16$ and $M:4,08$, $SD: 1,17$ accordingly) (see Table 1). To see whether emotions felt by young adults during and after lockdown were significantly different, paired sample T-Test was performed. The results revealed that only two emotions were significantly different during and after lockdown. Boredom was found significantly higher during than after lockdown ($t(284)= 2,664$, $p= 0,008$) while anger was significantly lower during than after lockdown ($t(284)= -4,283$, $p< 0,001$). Concerning the rest of the researched emotions, differences that traced were not statistically significant. As regards the second research question, i.e., whether “watching movies” as a leisure activity helped young adults to deal with negative emotions, it was found that during the restriction measures, watching movies seems to have a positive effect mainly on helping passing time ($M:3,79$, $SD:1,19$) and boredom ($M:3,63$, $SD:1,18$). The aggregated mean concerning “watching movies” as of a coping activity revealed that for the total of our sample “watching movies” has helped participants dealing with negative emotion moderately ($M: 2,92$, $SD: 0,92$).

Table 1. Emotions during and after lockdown.

	During lockdown Mean	During lockdown Std. Deviation	After lockdown Mean	After lockdown Std. Deviation
Stress	3,54	1,30	3,59	1,23
Loneliness	3,10	1,40	3,10	1,43
Boredom	3,72	1,28	3,51	1,34
Anger	3,05	1,43	3,35	1,44
Sorrow	3,77	1,10	3,85	1,14

The third aim of this study was to research whether entering university during pandemic has any significant relationship with negative emotions felt by participants. To this end a partial correlation analysis has been performed between bad feelings felt by students a) during and b) after lockdown with the year participants entered university. Participants’ age set as control variable. It was found that bad emotions felt during lockdown, were uncorrelated to the year participants enter university. However, participants’ bad feelings after lockdown found to have a low, positive and statistically significant relationship with the year participants entered university ($r(280)=0,129$, $p= 0,030$).

Table 2. Analysis of variance (BPS and FYSP).

Variable	Before pandemic students, (BPS) (n=153)		First year students in pandemic (FYSP) (n=130)		$F(1,282)$	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Total of bad feelings today	3,48	0,88	3,81	0,90	9,845	0,002
Stress	3,37	1,23	3,85	1,18	10,786	0,001
Sorrow	3,63	1,15	4,10	1,08	12,548	<0,001
Fear beloved	3,94	1,22	4,24	1,12	4,521	0,034

In simple words, those participants entered university more recently, that is, closer or during pandemic felt significantly stronger negative emotions, compared to participants enter university formerly, and that the observed difference was not due to their different age. To have a clearer picture of this an analysis of variance was performed with dependent variable the negative emotions felt after pandemic and year of entering university as the independent factor. It was found that after pandemic BPS as a group felt significantly higher stress, sorrow and fear of beloved compared to participants belonging into FYSP group (see Table 2).

5. Discussion

The current study underlines the effects of Covid-19 lockdown and restrictions on young adults in social-emotional area. The results of the present research are being discussed based on the research questions. Considering the first research question, boredom seems to be the highest rated emotion during lockdown, while a decrease after the lockdown is noted. More particular, restriction measures and limitations appear to cause negative emotions, including boredom (Brooks et al., 2020). Furthermore, emotion of anger increased during after the lockdown period, comparing to the lockdown time. While anger truly appears as one of the negative emotions caused by pandemic restriction measures (Brooks et al., 2020), young adults note a decrease in anger during the post lockdown period, comparing to older adults who note an increase (Maggi et al. 2021). In this particular topic, factors as finances and gender appear to affect these results (Brooks et al., 2020).

About the second research question, watching movies as a leisure activity seemed to have helped young adults to deal with negative emotions and in particular with boredom, which was the most highly rated negative emotion among the participants. According to researches, the above result is confirmed as media were widely used during quarantine in order to help people cope with negative feelings (Cauberghe et al., 2021) and specifically isolation (Taylor et al., 2020). The third research question examines the relationship between the year of enrolment in university and negative emotions. Young adults who entered university during pandemic felt more negative emotions compared to students who have entered university before pandemic. Adjustment to university seems to be a challenging process for first year students (Bland et al., 2012). In combination with the increase of negative emotions in young adults due to covid-19, it seems that FYSP have to deal with more difficulties than other students.

It is crucial to understand that the society is reflected on the educational system and vice versa. As young adults enroll university, it is significant to take their social-emotional needs into consideration and to provide them with the necessary support. In Greece, universities provide psychological support to the students who need it, through Student Consulting Centers. Furthermore, during the Covid-19 period, the Greek government had launched a psychological support hotline and support centers into hospital facilities (<https://www.moh.gov.gr/>). Nevertheless, future policies and practices need to focus on raising awareness and providing to young adults entering the university help seeking behaviors and skills.

In conclusion, further investigation is recommended including a follow up research using mixed methods in order to gain real insight into the social-emotional impact of Covid-19 to young adults.

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