

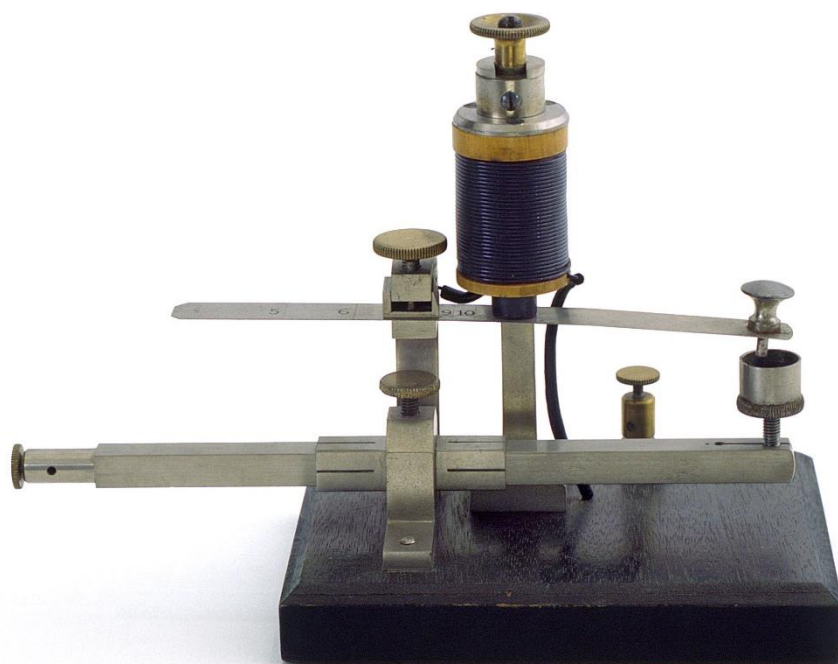
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# "We Just Wanted to Go Out, Have A Drink, Meet Everyone, Hug..." - Youth Narratives about Life During the Pandemic

**Ksenija Krstić (kkrstic@f.bg.ac.rs)**

Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

**Tijana Nikitović (tijana.nikitovic@gmail.com)**

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Laboratory for developmental psychology

**Milica Ninković (milicaninkovic266@gmail.com)**

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Laboratory for developmental psychology

## Abstract

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020 brought great changes in the daily lives of people of all ages. The initial empirical research conducted during the pandemic in many countries indicated an increased tendency of young people to develop psychological problems. This research aimed to shed additional light on young people's perspectives on the crisis and give them the opportunity to share their experiences of the pandemic. Through online form we collected 70 written narratives of adolescents and young people aged 14-26 (Mage = 20.1; SD = 2.9; 85.7% female). Collected narratives differed in length, coherence, valence, and content, which reflected young people's complex and diverse experiences during this pandemic crisis. In total, 755 segments were coded. Thematic analysis revealed eight major themes, with several subthemes within each. These major themes referred to 1) Sense of self, 2) Coping strategies, 3) Positive experiences, 4) Negative experiences, 5) Negative mental states, 6) Fears & anxieties, 7) Nostalgia & longing, and 8) Public attitudes. These findings can help us to "hear their voice" and gain a better understanding of adolescents' perspectives and experiences during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** adolescents and youth; narratives; crisis; qualitative study.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the great risk to people's health, led to unexpected disruptions in all domains of society's functioning. In accordance with WHO recommendation (WHO, 2020), Serbia declared state of emergency, with several measures introduced to hinder the spread of the corona virus and reduce human-to-human transmission. In a period of several months, state borders were closed, frequent curfews were imposed, and obligations to wear masks and maintain physical distance were introduced, requiring adaptations in the daily routines for which many people weren't prepared (Fioretti et al., 2020; Santos, 2020). All cultural and entertainment centres (theatres, cinemas, cafes), as well as shops and non-essential services were closed, along with restrictions on movement and socializing, limiting activities to a narrow family life. With the introduction of the state of emergency, educational institutions were also closed, while education was carried out remotely. Although the pandemic certainly had a negative impact on all age groups it did not have the same

effect on people of different socioeconomic status, health status, place of residence and age (Agberotimi et al, 2010; Glovacz & Schmits, 2020).

Young people were at lower health risk, because they rarely developed more severe symptoms of the disease. But the pandemic and preventive measures that followed, affected young people in a specific way, interrupting developmental tasks typical of their age. The most important tasks relate to the definition of identity and the development of personal autonomy through the redefinition of family ties, the construction of diverse peer network, decision-making regarding the schooling, employment, independent future, finding a partner (Alonso-Stuick et al., 2018; Glovacz & Schmits, 2020; Krstic, 2017). The socialization plays a central role in the lives of young people, and due to the pandemic, they faced missing important life events, missing opportunities to develop new contacts and social skills (Branquinho et al., 2020). This transitional period, characterized by numerous key decisions, is psychologically challenging due to pronounced uncertainty (Arnett, 2007) making young people more vulnerable in the context of the pandemic (Balon et al., 2015). In fact, the initial empirical research conducted during the pandemic indicated an increased tendency of young people to develop psychological problems (Branquinho et al., 2020; Fioretti et al., 2020; Liang et al., 2020; Oosterhoff et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

Having all that in mind, it is important to "hear their voice" (UNICEF, 2011), to get insights into youth's subjective experience of living during pandemic. Therefore, this research aimed to shed additional light on young people's perspectives on the crisis and give them the opportunity to share their experiences of the pandemic. More specifically, we wanted to explore how positive and negative memories during the pandemic were reflected in young people's narratives and which themes they used to make sense of their experiences.

## Method

### Sample and procedure

In order to gather adolescents' and youth's experiences during the pandemic, we constructed an online form with

the instruction to describe their perception of life during the pandemic, their positive and/or negative experiences and how those experiences affected them. From more than 1000 clicks on online form, we collected 119 written answers. We set the limit for min 800 characters, and all answers below that limit were excluded. We collected 70 written narratives from young people (85.7% female), aged 14-26 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 20.1$ ;  $Sd = 2.9$ ), in the period from January to March 2021, one year after the pandemic outbreak.

## Data analysis

We conducted reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to identify the main topics present in youth's narratives. The MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 software was used for coding and analysis. We conducted the analysis with a bottom-up exploratory approach and inductively developed a coding system as a basis for generating themes. All three researchers first read and analysed 10 narratives and generated initial codes. Through a series of discussions, researchers reached a consensus on a final coding system and themes.

## Results

Collected narratives differed in length, coherence, valence, and content, which reflected young people's complex and diverse experiences during this pandemic crisis. In total, 755 segments were coded. Thematic analysis revealed eight major themes, with several subthemes within each. These major themes referred to 1) Sense of self, 2) Coping strategies, 3) Positive experiences, 4) Negative experiences, 5) Negative mental states, 6) Fears & anxieties, 7) Nostalgia & longing, and 8) Public attitudes.

The most prevalent theme refer to strategies that young people used to cope with the crises and stress induced by pandemic. They wrote about different activities (everyday activities, physical exercise, volunteering) as a proactive way of dealing with the lockdown and pandemic. *"This is where we hear the 'turning of a new page' in our four walls, new habits, healthy eating, exercise, painting, reading novels, watching movies, everything that was missing before the pandemic, digging for ourselves, searching for answers, something more mature, more meaningful, the search for peace, the real, inner one"*. (Angela, 20)

Also, often they would mention focusing on positive perspective, their ability to adapt and accept what is inevitable, that all of that will past soon, and we will get back to normal. *"It will be very strange when everything goes back to normal. But I hope it'll happen as soon as possible"*. (Jan 16)

Humour was one of the often-used coping strategies among emerging adults. In online contact with peers, humour helped them get through "one more day locked in the house". *"We somehow jokingly tried to overcome the stress of constantly publishing the numbers of new cases with assumptions, guessing - we competed to see who was closest to the 'correct solution'. It's kind of out of place, but it helped us, and I'll definitely always remember those moments"*. (Mila, 24)

A number of narratives contained notes about different positive experiences during the pandemic. They referred to quality time with family, time to unwind and focus on oneself, time to dedicate themselves to their interests and hobbies, for which they normally don't have time: *"Nice things have happened to me. I met a boy..."; "I liked being alone for a bit and enjoying idleness and laziness"; "...I had fun with my family, and it wasn't that hard."*

That not everything during the pandemic and especially lockdowns were fun and easy for young people is indicated by many responses describing various negative mental states - many participants narrate about distress, feeling depressed, overwhelmed, loneliness, boredom, troubles with concentrations. *"I started shouting and crying, I was both angry and sad, bitter. I didn't want to be in isolation anymore, hello, my youth was passing by"*. (Emili, 18). Young people wrote about negative experiences related to family, school/work, socializing, restrictions: *"...busy with online school that was too hard"; "...social life has been significantly impoverished..."; "Lockdown is a horror!"*

Further, a common theme in the narratives were their various worries and fears. Very impressive are their quotes about fear due to many unknowns related to virus, disease, pandemic: *"It was somehow the creepiest thing, you do something, you protect yourself, and you have no idea how effective it is, and yet you have no idea how scary, 'funny' or whatever that virus actually is."* (Iva, 23)

They also described their worries about the uncertain and unknown future, *"I'm afraid of what the future holds for us"* for significant others, about fragility of the social system, etc.: *"but more important than the subjective feeling is that the whole world is collapsing, nothing works right"* (Mia, 17) *"...I am most concerned about how the world will return to normal because we are increasingly separating from each other"* (Angela, 20)

The fact that the pandemic has caused major disruptions in everyday life and imposed major restrictions on young people can be seen in the frequent mention that they *"longing for a normal life"*: *"I think that all of us at this moment care more about freedom than health"; "I'm longing for hugs and companionship"; "We missed everything that used to be taken for granted...": "...I feel like my youth is passing by and I'm not enjoying it."*

Finally, youth narratives are showing how did this experience affected their self-concept. Young people saw pandemic crisis as an opportunity for personal growth, they matured, gain valuable insights about one self's and world around them and made clearer their priorities. Besides that, imposed social confinement helped them recognised significant people and *"importance of little things"*: *"I realized the true value of things that I used to take for granted, such as hugs, socializing, going out... and how much they mean to me, for what I am"* (Eva, 22). On the other hand, in some cases those restrictions and social distancing led to deterioration of self-concept.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed at exploring young people's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from this study can help us gain a better understanding of young people perspectives and narratives about their life during this crisis.

One significant theme in their stories of pandemic, refer to their distress and how they dealt with it. A number of young people from our sample showed resilience and use of adaptive coping strategies - devising activities and hobbies to fill the day, maintaining online contact with friends, using humour - these are some of the strategies that helped them cope with stress. However, the number of young people who used non-adaptive strategies - denial of danger, or on the contrary complete withdrawal due to overwhelming fear or intolerance of uncertainty - is not negligible either.

The largest number of codes in our analysis refer to negative experiences, states and feelings experienced by young people during this period. The results of this research are consistent with earlier findings that young people were more open about their negative experiences than positive ones, due to the need to give meaning and elaborate on the autobiographical past (Fioretti & Smorti, 2017; Fivush et al., 2003).

What young people missed the most was socializing and all the little things that make up their normal life - socializing, going out, sitting in a cafe. On the other hand, restrictions on social contacts and lockdowns pushed them back into the "arms of the family". Thanks to the opportunity for young people to spend quality time in shared activities with family members, family served as a protective factor in the situation of the pandemic crisis (Fioretti et al., 2020)

A significant theme in their narratives were positive memories and experiences, which affected their self-perception. They used the time of the pandemic to devote themselves to the things they love, and self-discovery plays a key role in the narratives of positive experiences. The positive changes they wrote about are related to some deeper insights about themselves, discovering their own resilience, abilities they didn't even know they had, and generally the ability to deal with this kind of crisis. Such positive changes experienced by people because of stress have already been described in the literature, as "stress-related growth" (Park et al., 1996), or "growth through adversity" (Joseph & Linley, 2006).

We should not ignore the finding that a number of participants wrote about unpleasant experiences and feelings, that they were overwhelmed with fear, anxious, distressed, unable to cope with uncertainty (Wigg et al., 2020). From the perspective of mental health, this finding indicates their vulnerability and how such major disruptions can shake them, make them even more insecure about themselves and the world they are living in. Although the greatest attention of all systems was focused on the preservation of people's physical health, and young people were the least health-risked, in such situations the issue of

vulnerability and sensitivity of young people should deserve equal attention.

Taken all together, thematic analysis of young people's narratives indicate the complexity of their experiences during the pandemic crisis, which are characterized by mixed positive and negative feelings, the obstacles in achieving developmental tasks, but also opportunities for personal growth. Research findings also indicate the necessity of paying attention to the mental health of young people and their vulnerability in the context of crises such as the one we have just witnessed.

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