



Exploring Youth Behavior and Mental Health: A Psychological and Sociological Analysis During the Early COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis that has significantly affected healthcare systems, social structures, and individual well-being. This study explores how extreme behavioral shifts (enantiadromia) and passive coping strategies, such as withdrawal and avoidance, have emerged among youth in response to pandemic-induced stress and anxiety. These coping mechanisms can negatively impact psychosocial well-being, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and social strain, further exacerbating the societal challenges posed by the pandemic. The study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of how youth coping behaviors may either alleviate or intensify the effects of COVID-19 within communities and the potential long-term consequences of these patterns. A qualitative phenomenological research design was utilized to explore participants' lived experiences. Data collection methods included interviews, transect walk observations, and personal surveillance, providing a comprehensive understanding of youth engagement with the pandemic in real-life contexts.

Keywords: Enantiadromia, Passive Coping, Psychosocial Adjustment, Youth

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a far-reaching challenge, adversely affecting multiple aspects of society (Kar, Arafat, Kabir, & Sharma, 2020). Beyond the direct health implications, the pandemic has introduced profound psychological threats, affecting not only infected individuals but also various societal groups (Duan & Zhu, 2020). Among these, youth are particularly vulnerable, as this stage of life is crucial for physical, social, emotional, and psychological development. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is already a challenging period, and the COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated these difficulties (UNICEF, 2020).

Young people often rely on their social circles for support and guidance, yet during the pandemic, they have been increasingly inclined toward passive coping mechanisms, poor psychological adjustment, and enantiodromia. Passive coping, as defined by Positive Psychology (2020), involves a lack of proactive responses to adverse circumstances. Following the outbreak, various communication platforms—including television, radio, social media, and in-person advocacy—were employed to disseminate information and curb the spread of COVID-19.

Despite widespread awareness campaigns led by youth volunteers and health professionals, a significant portion of young people failed to adhere to precautionary measures, such as social distancing and hygiene practices. Instead, some engaged in behaviors contrary to recommended guidelines, a phenomenon Jung (1989) referred to as enantiodromia—a psychological shift toward the opposite behavior. Conte (2009) describes this as the tendency for an excessive force in one direction to eventually produce its opposite.

Individuals influence one another through their actions, sometimes triggering opposing behaviors in response. When people feel constrained or pressured, they may react by adopting counterproductive behaviors, which, in the context of COVID-19, has intensified the virus's spread. Many youths displayed passive coping behaviors, including externalizing blame, withdrawal, and avoidance. According to Field, Cabe, and Schneiderman (1985), individuals who engage in passive coping often attribute responsibility to external factors, leading to feelings of helplessness. Even as infection rates surged and emergency measures were implemented, some young individuals continued to disregard pandemic regulations.

Adolescence is a critical phase where individuals strive for autonomy, often distancing themselves from family influences while prioritizing their psychological and social well-being. Anderson, Novak, and Keith (2002) define psychosocial adjustment as the balance between individual needs and environmental demands. However, with the outbreak of COVID-19, enantiodromia and passive coping patterns have hindered young people's adherence to preventive measures, even in countries with strict lockdown policies.

2. Methods

A qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design was employed to explore the lived experiences of youth during the pandemic. Data were collected through interviews, transect walk observations, and critical surveillance.

Sampling and Data Collection

Participants were identified based on two criteria: their potential relevance to the study and their willingness to participate. Initially, study areas and participants were selected, followed by transect walk observations conducted in adherence to World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines. Consent was obtained from identified participants, and additional observations were carried out in indoor recreational spaces, such as pool game houses and khat-selling venues.

A total of five indoor pool game houses and two substance-selling establishments were purposively selected for observation due to their high youth presence. Interviews were conducted with five

participants, and a total of eleven individuals participated in the study. The collected data were analyzed using framework analysis, chosen for its ability to integrate personal experiences with contemporary pandemic-related challenges.

3. Results and Discussion

Conte (2009) suggests that enantiodromia is frequently observed in adolescents transitioning to college life, where they may adopt behaviors contrary to their upbringing. Similarly, enantiodromia manifests in individuals facing late-life challenges, such as retirement, diminished social support, or changes in family responsibilities (Thompson & Whearty, 2004). Although individuals may outwardly display positive qualities, underlying psychological and economic stressors influence their behavior and self-perception.

Research on the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the psychological impact of prolonged isolation, restricted social activities, and staying at home (Ho, Chee, & Ho, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). However, this study found evidence of poor psychosocial adjustment among youth despite public health interventions.

Passive Coping

Coping strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive in response to stress (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2015). In this study, many young individuals engaged in passive coping by externalizing blame for the pandemic rather than actively managing their emotions and stressors. Unlike previous research indicating that pandemics can lead to psychological trauma (Kang, Li, & Hu, 2020), the youths in this study exhibited behavioral and cognitive passive coping strategies, often attributing the crisis to divine will rather than taking personal precautions.

One interviewee stated:

"I know that COVID-19 is a deadly pandemic. In my opinion, this disease is a form of divine retribution for humanity's sins. The world is filled with immorality, hatred, and corruption. Whether I take precautions or not, I believe that the solution rests with God, and we are at a point of no return."

This belief reflects a passive coping style rooted in externalization rather than active engagement with protective measures. Research by The Partner Center (2020) supports the idea that fear and anxiety surrounding disease outbreaks can lead to overwhelming emotions, yet in this study, many youths demonstrated behavioral indifference, ignoring social distancing guidelines and continuing recreational activities.

4. Recommendations

To mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and address its psychosocial impact, targeted interventions should focus on vulnerable youth populations, including:

- **Street-Involved Youth:** Many urban youths rely on daily earnings from street-based activities and lack adequate knowledge about COVID-19 precautions. Efforts should be made to provide accessible education and resources.
- **Rural Youth:** Limited healthcare access and lower adherence to public health guidelines necessitate additional awareness campaigns tailored to rural communities.
- **Low-Income Youth:** Daily wage earners, such as hawkers and peddlers, struggle to comply with lockdown measures due to economic necessity. Financial and social support mechanisms should be implemented.
- **Unemployed and Underemployed Youth:** Job insecurity forces many young individuals to prioritize economic survival over health precautions. Job creation initiatives and mental health support programs should be introduced.
- **Commercial Sex Workers:** Due to the nature of their work, this group is at high risk of exposure. Targeted interventions, including alternative income opportunities and health support, should be provided.
- **Youth with Disabilities:** Limited accessibility to COVID-19 information has left many individuals with disabilities uninformed. Health messages should be adapted to accommodate various disabilities, such as sign language interpretation for the hearing-impaired and braille materials for the visually impaired.

5. Conclusion

The study highlights the role of passive coping and enantiodromia in shaping youth responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many young individuals exhibited a lack of engagement with public health measures, instead externalizing blame or resorting to withdrawal. Understanding these psychological and behavioral patterns is crucial for designing interventions that promote adaptive coping and psychological resilience in youth populations.

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