



Feelings, Relationships, and Mental Health of Chinese Adolescents and Young Adults During the COVID-19 Epidemic

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Abstract. The outbreak of COVID-19 first took place in China in 2020 and the Chinese government took many immediate policies to prevent the spread of the virus. All these behaviors are likely to make an impact on people's mental health, especially adolescents and young adults who are more vulnerable. Thus, in this work, a case study was done to determine the effect of the pandemic on these people's feelings, mental well-being, and relationship with their friends and relatives. A face-to-face interview was conducted, which contains questions on various aspects like recreational activities and attitude towards the pandemic. The result showed that the pandemic only caused a limited effect on the interviewee's psychological health and relationship with others while that of recreational activities was slightly more significant.

Keywords: COVID-19 · relationship · mental health · case study

1 Introduction

In the Chinese city of Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in the central part of China, several cases of pneumonia were diagnosed in December 2019. These cases are caused by an unknown reason, which was later discovered to be a new type of coronavirus named Coronavirus Disease-19 (COVID-19) by the World Health Organization [1]. The outbreak was referred to as the Public Health Emergency of International Concern by WHO (World Health Organization[WHO], 2020) and later spread all over the world, causing great inconvenience, financial decline, and even death to people worldwide [2]. Not long after the detection of coronavirus, the Chinese government announced some strict policies to prevent the further spread of the virus, like frequent nucleic acid tests and the prohibition of massive gatherings [3]. Among all these actions, one regulation, which suggested using online courses and works to substitute the offline ones, would make a great impact to children, adolescents, and young adults.

Adolescents and young adults are usually whether still studying at high schools and colleges or just stepped into work for a short period of time. They are at a period when their maturity develops rapidly and the surroundings, like the place they spend the most time on, and social position, like the network of interpersonal relationship and methods

of communicating with other people change dramatically. For the same reason, their psychological maturity and psychological enduring capacity are also growing while some of their opinions that they have believed for the entire childhood and adolescence may be transformed unconsciously. Such abrupt outbreak of COVID-19 and strict, immediate policies would undoubtedly affect their normal daily life as well as psychological health. Lockdown policy forced them to stay at home so the normal outing and shopping for necessities were likely to be influenced. Online courses and work reduced efficiency to some extent. In addition, adolescents and young adults are more likely to develop psychological problems such as depression symptoms and anxiety since they're more vulnerable than ordinary adults in general while their interpersonal communication and relationship with others might also be affected for the same reason [4, 5].

Much research has been conducted in this field previously, especially at the beginning of 2020 which is just a few months after the outbreak. Effects of multiple factors such as social participation, residential area, and affected graduation on adolescents and young adults' loneliness, mental needs, and well-being have all been investigated through online questionnaires [5, 6]. These conclusions turned out to be consistent with the hypothesis that the pandemic indeed caused a significant increase in psychological problems, including anxiety, stress, and depression symptoms. However, all these surveys were cross-sectional and conducted online, whose limitations are obvious and inevitable. They all used WeChat, the most popular chatting application in China to sample participants, so generalizability is unclear. The lack of face-to-face interviews makes volunteers mostly people who are familiar with electronic devices and have the interest and ability to reach the questionnaire, while researchers couldn't get detailed information about how the volunteers felt during the lockdown except for various cold data [7]. Data is important, but under such circumstances, it can't reflect how a person feels accurately. But this is of significant importance in analyzing why and how a person falls into mental illnesses and determining a suitable treatment method. Precise analysis can be beneficial in guiding us on what to do in the post-pandemic period and even further the comprehension of PTSD as well since COVID-19 is also a kind of trauma. Thus, as the virus had been controlled, an offline meeting is possible, and a face-to-face interview about the psychological effect of COVID-19 could be conducted. This in-person interview aims to find out the impact of COVID-19 on people's mental health and relationship while supplying the previous research with a more specific reason analysis.

2 Method

A series of questions were asked during a face-to-face interview conducted on November 7th. As the topic is about the impact of COVID-19, most of the questions have two parts: a year before the outbreak and the period during the epidemic. Questions include recreational activities, relationships with parents, friends, colleagues or classmates, partner (if any), and other relatives, perceived severity and controllability, behaviors, and feelings and thoughts for sure. A few example questions were given like 'go to travel to relax' and 'read books or magazines' for recreational activities part. Each section has three or five scales of frequency, such as 'frequently, often, sometimes, rarely, and never' for the interviewee to choose from, and apart from some examples already given, open-ended

questions followed after some sections for a supplement. The answers were later compared to conclude. The interviewee is a twenty-six-year-old woman who works in an educational institute, which means she was twenty-four when the virus first appeared. She got a graduate degree and lives alone in good health. Another important thing is that the interview wasn't just questions and answers. When some differences or similarities or simply interesting answers are spoken, a further discussion that only focuses on the topic just mentioned will be done to get more detailed information about what happened during the lockdown and how interviewees felt about it. The interviewee's personality was also considered. This procedure, to some extent, can improve the accuracy of answers because simple scale questions sometimes can't reflect reality and may cause mistakes in later analysis, in which case comprehensive and long-term experiences of interviewees are needed.

3 Results

Firstly, the interviewee's recreational activities before the COVID-19 pandemic include watching TV, going to café, hanging out with friends, etc. and she especially enjoys travel. But as the lockdown policy was published, frequency of travel declined while that of reading books increases. Moreover, the books are mainly collections of poems. It is concluded that the phenomenon is caused by the strict lockdown policy, which forced everyone to stay at home so she couldn't hang out with friends shopping or visit the museums, which are her usual ways to deal with free time. And interviewee said whenever the severity of the virus decreased and it was allowed to go out, she would seize each opportunity to travel whose explanation is allowance of hanging out meant it was safe to travel. It could be conducted from the transcript of the interview, "Even though I couldn't go out during the lockdown, I still traveled both before and after the pandemic at a regular intervals. The city wasn't locked all the time and I would go out as long as it's permitted because the allowance of going out means it was safe and OK to do so. And during the pandemic, the time I spent alone increased a lot so I had more time to buy and read books. Mostly collections of poems." Other activities like listening to music and eating out remained almost the same. In addition, the existence of pets was also mentioned a little in the interview. The interviewee mentioned, "I kept a puppy during the pandemic. I had more time to play with her and it is suitable for someone looking for company during the lockdown." It can be seen that pets might play a considerable role in comforting people who missed company of others during the lockdown while they couldn't go out and easing their loneliness and pressure.

Moving on now to consider relationships. The relationship between her and her boyfriend was very close both before and during the pandemic. However, this answer couldn't reach anything because the relationship before COVID-19 was a different one, and to be specific, a broke up happened just during the pandemic. And it turned out that this separation had nothing to do with the virus, which was just a coincidence. The only thing that can be deduced is the partner relationship was little affected. In comparison with partner relationships, that of other relatives, who are mainly brothers and parents, was less close. In general, the relative relationship is also similar to that before the pandemic and it was healthy and close but relatives, especially parents, are

likely to make too many demands on her. “It is just family members would want you not to do something. They would raise objections to some of your thoughts, like career and relationships.” She would share her thoughts and worries with her parents but only a part of them and she feels her parents can’t understand her enough. By contrast, she would share more with her friends and trust them more regardless of time. “I only choose a part of my problems to share with my relatives. I don’t share all of them. As for friends, I will most of it. Only a very few problems that I won’t say.” A possible explanation for this might be that in traditional Chinese culture, which is highly hierarchical through family ties [8]. Respect for superiority is a fundamental part of Chinese culture and this might be responsible for the phenomenon as respect may cause children to follow their parents for their entire childhood.

The effect of COVID-19 on her well-being and mental health is limited, which is similar to that of relationships. Even though the strict lockdown policy had caused much inconvenience or even difficulties, she was still very optimistic and looked forward to each day energetically, even though she recognizes a person who died of coronavirus as well as many colleagues who have contracted it. As she summarized during the interview, “The COVID-19 didn’t cause much impact to me whether in study or work. I mean in fact I was not strictly prohibited from doing a certain thing.” Feelings of loneliness or isolation or worries about financial consequences never emerged. However, she did worry that she might get contracted a little bit, which might be the reason why precautionary behaviors like wearing masks are done all the time. The only thing that interviewee answered ‘worries quite a bit’ is the social disorder due to the virus. She explained it in the interview, “It was probably because I saw many, for example, when an outbreak of virus happened at some place, where the government and management were improper, may old people had to stay in the shelters and lived a terrible life. It really made me nervous. Especially in that very large and famous city, the management was so inappropriate that people even beat dogs until they die. I was totally shocked when I heard the news. And all these things made me pretty worried.” What can be concluded is COVID-19 resulted in limited changes in her personal well-being and psychological health but the impact on entire society is more severe and worrying in comparison.

4 Conclusion

To sum up, the effects of COVID-19 vary in different aspects. Most recreational activities were not affected except those related to the lockdown, such as travel or hanging out. Work and study were influenced more significantly as online work and courses took place which, to some extent, decreased efficiency. Those works that must be done through computers remained the same, however. Different kinds of relationships only received little impact because various apps like WeChat provided reliable communication approaches to maintain the relationship, whether it was close or distant initially. Influence on mental health is moderate. On the one hand, the pandemic did cause many people to worry about a social disorder or that they may contract the virus, especially those who have infected friends. On the other hand, the impact on each individual is quite limited as people still held a positive attitude towards life, and most believed the

controllability of the virus is great [9]. As this case very clearly demonstrates, the psychological impact on young adults is limited, which is consistent with some other studies [10].

These findings cannot be extrapolated to everyone. A case study can provide more detailed information but its limitations are obvious, too. First is generality, or variability. The sample only contains one or few people, so it is hard to say the interviewee can represent the general population and caution must be applied. Each person has his or her own job, family background, financial condition, social circle, experiences, and personality so almost everyone holds a different opinion on whether the differences are important or meaningless. Apart from that, the severity of the pandemic differs from province to province, for example, Wuhan is one of the most affected cities but the case study was only conducted in one region. Second, all the analyses are qualitative instead of quantitative so validity and reliability need to be examined. Without specific data, it is hard to convince others only through comparison. Third, some people may already have potential psychological problems and COVID-19 just act as a trigger. The trigger could be any other negative events and it's just a coincidence to be COVID. Such cases should not be involved in the final analysis but it's difficult to distinguish them.

Since it is already a post-pandemic world, more valid and reliable research that couldn't be done during the outbreak can be conducted because the previous lockdown policy doesn't exist anymore. Loneliness, depression, and PTSD along with more detailed reasons and analysis are vital future directions. The impact of other factors like Chinese culture and job types also needs to be considered. A reasonable approach for future research might be combining a case study with a cross-sectional survey that has a large sample. However, 'what to do in exact' and 'how to do it' remain unclear, which requires more attempts.

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