Influence of COVID-19 on Emerging Adulthood and Identity Exploration

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Abstract: The emergence of COVD-19 evokes not only public's concerns on health problems, but also concerns on social development. Emerging adulthood was proposed by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett in 2000 to illustrate a period of transition from adolescence to adulthood, which followed the development of the revolutions in the 1960s, making adult transitions happen later. The current study examined how the pandemic influences emerging adulthood and identity development. Emerging adulthood is the period between achieving independence, from age 18 to 29. In emerging adulthood, individuals experience identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in between, and optimism. The pandemic influences the youth's lifestyle by decreasing their social interaction and annual income and increasing the time spent alone or with their families. This study is a qualitative research based on document analysis, which is useful in exploring how or why things have occurred. The result shows that the pandemic influences emerging adults' life satisfaction and identity exploration by increasing life instability and decreasing social interaction. Possible solutions to the result are provided and discussed. Knowing how the pandemic influence emerging adults can raise public attention on mental health problems for individuals in this age range. This study can also provide information for further research on emerging adulthood development.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, COVID-19, identity exploration, identity development, pandemic

1.   Introduction

Emerging adulthood is defined as a stage of the life span between young adolescence and young adulthood. According to Arnett, it is developed by the four revolutions during the 1960s and 1970s. Adult transitions happen later with the Technology Revolution, Sex Revolution, Women's Revolution, and Youth Revolution. As shown in Figure 1, the median marriage age for men has increased to over 30, and for women has increased to over 28 in the United States. The delayed age of marriage, as an example, indicates the transition period from young adolescence to young adulthood. Arnett's theory about emerging adulthood shows five pillars of this period, identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and optimism [1]. The age range of emerging adulthood is 18 to 29, which is consistent with the age to attend and finish undergraduate and graduate schools. However, from 2019 to the present, individuals have been suffering from the pandemic more or less. Emerging adults experience shelter-home orders, social distance policy, and other policies

that affect social interactions. Understanding how these factors influence emerging adulthood and emerging adults' identity exploration is essential.

This paper is a qualitative research based on document and data analysis. With the help of multiple sources, the influence of the pandemic is analyzed from different aspects. This study can help people understand the influence of the pandemic on emerging adults' identity exploration process and raise their attention to the pressure emerging adults are now suffering from.
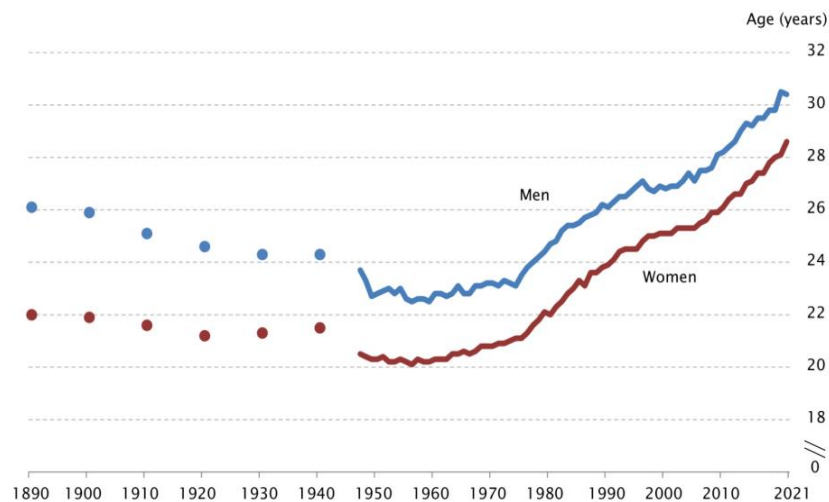

Figure 1: Median age at first marriage: 1890-2021[2]

2.   Influence Analysis of COVID-19 on Emerging Adulthood and Identity Exploration

2.1.   Identity Exploration and Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a period that individuals are not completely independent but are already finished secondary school. In this period, emerging adults are trying to get ready to take the role of stable adults. Identity exploration is activated when individuals can access new people or things to explore. Compared to adults who have a more stable life and responsibilities but have less time to explore new things and chance to change their life, emerging adults have more opportunities and time to have deep exploration of love, work, ideologies, and experiences. From Figure 2, data collected from the studies by Alan and his colleagues, individuals aged from 18 to 23 have the highest score in the identity exploration subscale, consistent with the emerging adulthood age range. In this case, identity exploration is a centerpiece during this period and is viewed as one of the pillars of this period. People who successfully explore their identity can better define their sense of self in different times and situations. In contrast, the lack of identity exploration or disturbance of it may lead to many types of mental illness. With identity exploration, emerging adults can find their place in society, which helps them to become stable adults. The process of forming an identity for young people involves exploring a variety of possibilities, choosing one or more of them, and then committing to that choice [3]. Based on Marcia, by the level of exploration and commitment, identity statuses can be divided into four types, foreclosure, achievement, diffusion, and moratorium [4]. Individuals with low exploration and high commitment will fall into the foreclosure category, while those with low commitment will fall into the diffusion category. Individuals with high exploration and high

commitment will fall into the achievement category, while those with low commitment will fall into the moratorium category.
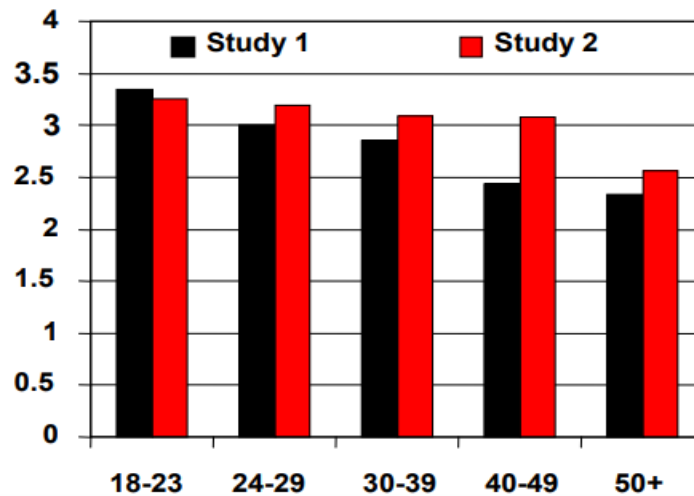

Figure 2: Age-group Differences on Identity-Exploration Subscale, in Original and Replication Studies [5]

2.2. COVID-19 and Emerging Adulthood

2.2.1. Decreased Social Interaction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government and related institutions presented policies restricting social interaction and activities, such as shelter-home order and social distance policy. Despite these pandemic-related alterations, the emergence of mental illness is particularly susceptible to occur in young adulthood [6]. The highest rate among all age groups, up to 40% of American emerging adults have a diagnosis of a mental health issue [7]. What's more, compared with stable adults, emerging adults can spend more time exploring new things and meeting new people. However, the policies restricting individual social interactions and reducing the opportunities for people to go out and meet people highly interfere with emerging adults' daily social life. In this case, the pandemic greatly impacts emerging adults and makes their life more unstable than before.

2.2.2. Increased Time Living at Parental Home

Another impact of the shelter-home order is that it increases emerging adults' time at their parental homes. According to Sharon, residential independence is regarded by 80% of emerging adults as a key indicator of independence [8]. In this case, living with their parents will weaken their sense of independence, impacting their acquisition of stable adult roles. Young people consider themselves adults if they can accept responsibilities for themselves, make independent decisions, and establish financial independence. In this case, living with parents will interfere with the necessary development during emerging adulthood.

2.2.3. Decreased Income and Job Opportunities

The pandemic caused decreased income and job opportunities, the increased price of daily necessities, and uncertainty in the labor market. Of the 16.9 million people unemployed in July, 9.6 million (57%) were unable to work because their employers closed or lost business due to the pandemic [9].

Although the number of unemployed people includes individuals other than emerging adults, it still shows the losses of job opportunities and the turmoil in life. Because of the hardness of finding jobs and maintaining lives, the degree of difficulty in having financial independence is harder than in the time before the pandemic. These social impacts caused by the pandemic increase the instability of emerging adults and make them have less financial independence, which may increase anxiety and mental health problems.

2.2.4. Impact on College Students

Aimed at emerging adults attending college, the pandemic altered traditional studying methods to decrease the interaction between people and control the spread of the virus. Schools asked us to use Zoom to have classes and use ProctorU to take exams. However, these alternatives limit students' interactions and increase their anxiety caused by the technical issues they may meet and are not familiar with. In this case, emerging adults may have less time to self-focus and feel less optimistic, which are two important pillars of emerging adulthood. As mentioned earlier, the pandemic decreased job opportunities, which also increased the pressure for students to find internships and jobs after graduation.

2.3. COVID-19 and Identity Exploration

2.3.1. Impact of Identity Statuses

Based on the policies and restrictions caused by the pandemic, there are fewer opportunities and freedom to explore new things and meet new people. In this case, emerging adults are more likely to fall into diffusion and foreclosure identity statuses, especially in the interpersonal relationship identity domain. As mentioned before, diffusion individuals have low levels in both exploration and commitment. The hallmark of the diffusion domain is the lack of agency and direction. People in this domain often score lowest on well-being measures and highest on risk-taking [5]. Moratorium individuals have a high level of exploration and low level of commitment, which makes them exhibit high openness and curiosity, but mixed good and bad when it comes to well-being [5]. In this case, emerging adults during the pandemic are more likely to fall into these two domains and increase the risk of having well-being problems, especially in the interpersonal domain, which was influenced by the policies to control COVID-19 the most. In this case, the situation caused by the pandemic and the identity statuses influenced by the pandemic will work together on the individual's interpersonal relationships, causing more pressure on emerging adults. However, identity statuses are transitional in that most people's statuses can increase to a higher level of commitment with the past time [10]. Identity statuses can also regress temporarily associated with distress and environmental changes, which are normal and adaptive [11]. In this case, individuals can progress on their identity statuses after living normally, but it can also worsen if the restrictions are more severe.

2.3.2. Results in Neo-Eriksonian Perspective of Identity Styles

Based on the Dual-Cycle Process Model by the Neo-Eriksonian Perspectives, there are five steps to explore identity, exploration in breadth, commitment making, exploration in depth, identification with commitment, and ruminative exploration [12]. Individuals form their identity in the first two steps and evaluate their identity in the next two steps [12]. Based on Kazumi, support, open disclosure, and meta-exploration functioned to build the conditions for exploration while investigating, creating an idea, and conflict-facilitated (or conflict-triggered) exploration. Demotivating blocked exploration, on the other hand [13]. During COVID-19, demotivating situations increased, and meta-exploration opportunities decreased, which interfered with the identity exploration process. Identity style in Neo-

Eriksonian perspectives is the decision-making processes that underlie exploration and commitment [14]. There are three identity styles, informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant. Most achievement and moratorium identity statuses people have an informational identity style, which is a proactive, intentional, and flexible approach. And most diffusion and some moratorium individuals have diffuse avoidant identity styles. These people avoid making decisions and situations to determine who they are. In this case, more people will have informational and diffuse-avoidant identity styles because of the lack of exploration opportunities caused by the pandemic.

3.   Conclusion

As analysis above, COVID-19 caused more anxiety and instability for emerging adults in many aspects and decreased exploration opportunities, optimism, and social interactions. These influences disrupt the transition from dependent adolescence to independent adulthood, which occurs during emerging adulthood. In this case, the pandemic increased the mental health risk among emerging adults and also impacted identity exploration. This study aims to raise public attention on emerging adults during the pandemic. Emerging adults' mental health is vulnerable, and the identity development process in this period is important. This study is only based on document and data analysis and integration. Understanding the causal relationship needs further experiments, surveys, and other research methods. In addition, most of the data and experiments in the documents are based on WEIRD samples, which may influence the results.

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