

Difficulties, uncertainty, and opportunity: The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic by early to late adolescence in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The pandemic created an unfamiliar situation for adolescents, especially within the school context. Drawing on the theory of cognitive appraisal, according to which people evaluate the benefit, harm, and threat of a certain event, this study explored Czech adolescents' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted six focus groups with early (11–12 years), middle (14–15 years), and late (18–19 years) adolescents. Using thematic analysis, we identified three themes—pandemic as difficulties, uncertainty, and a (un)seized opportunity. While some younger participants initially perceived the pandemic as exciting, others struggled immediately with isolation, online learning, and disrupted daily activities. The feelings of distressing uncertainty, but also the appraisal of the pandemic as an opportunity to utilize free time differently, which in some cases faded over time, prevailed among late adolescents. This study captured the effects of the pandemic and its appraisals on adolescents' subjective well-being and the shift in the thinking of early and late adolescents.

KEYWORDS

adolescents, cognitive appraisal, individual experience, pandemic, well-being

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a severe threat to people's mental health and psychosocial well-being, affecting the everyday functioning of society. Adolescents were among the most vulnerable groups because they had to deal with developmental disruptions in multiple domains, such as peer relations, family functioning, and education (Hussong et al., 2021). At the same time, considerable differences between adolescents stemmed from the extent to which they perceived that the pandemic affected their lifestyle (De France et al., 2022). Few adolescents had experienced severe problems (e.g., with peers) before the pandemic and showed an improvement after its outbreak (Daniunaite et al., 2021).

Some authors attributed differences in individual experiences of the pandemic to stress appraisals (e.g., Landy et al., 2022; Marín-Chollom & Panjwani, 2022). Initially coined by Arnold (1970) and later Lazarus (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the concept of cognitive appraisal refers to an evaluation of the potential relevance of a particular situation to one's well-being. In other words, people evaluate the effects of potential benefits, harms, and threats of the situation on their well-being or self-esteem and goals. Lazarus and Folkman (Folkman & Lazarus, 1990) referred to this process as primary appraisal, which is the focus of our study, while secondary appraisal refers to the evaluation of available cognitive strategies and efforts needed to deal with the benefits, harms, and threats of the situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1990).

To our knowledge, previous studies capturing individuals' appraisals of the COVID-19 pandemic have relied mostly on standardized questionnaire-based quantitative measures. Our study complements this approach by taking a qualitative perspective to identify types of primary appraisals that spontaneously emerge among adolescents during the group talk reflecting on their personal experience of the pandemic.

1.1 | COVID-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic: Constant changes and few certainties

The government's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic could, in retrospect, be described as technocratic populism (Buščíková & Baboš, 2020). The government started strong with very strict anti-Covid measures (nicknamed "blanket quarantine"; Kouřil & Ferenčuhová, 2020), creating the impression that everything was under control and carefully planned. However, later on, the anti-Covid measures were constantly changing without a clear explanation of the reasoning to the public (Klimovský et al., 2021). The fast response to the first wave of COVID-19 in early 2020 was replaced by a much more relaxed approach during the summer of 2020, which led to the highest numbers of newly infected per million people (compared to any other country in the world) in October 2020 (Buščíková & Baboš, 2020). The measures implemented around the Christmas holidays were a good example of the government's steps that the public did not receive well. A ban on alcohol consumption (especially at Christmas markets in towns and cities) aimed to prevent gatherings of large groups of people, but the public criticized this measure, especially when the shopping centers were open to allow individuals to shop for Christmas presents (Government of the Czech Republic, 2022).

Furthermore, the government replaced the Minister of Health five times within 13 months, with one minister serving twice within this period. One of the ministers left the position because he was seen breaking the anti-Covid measures implemented by the government, and another one had been called out in the media for having unacknowledged property and discrepancies in his tax returns. One decided to leave on his own, one was dismissed by the prime minister, and one was replaced due to the elections when a leading party in the government changed.

1.2 | Events at schools

The duration of school closure in the Czech Republic was among the longest compared to other European countries, ranking 8th after, for example, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Slovenia (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022).

The schools were first closed (except the kindergartens) on 11 March 2020, until further notice. On 11 May 2020, students in the last years of primary and secondary schools returned to schools. In June, pupils returned to schools voluntarily, with a maximum of 10 (later 15) pupils in a group. At the beginning of October 2020, schools were operating under the regional hygienic station's rules, and they were closed after the region was designated as the so-called red zone, indicating a worsening situation. Face masks were mandatory at all educational levels for the employees. Pupils in the second stage of elementary schools were divided in half and took turns attending the classes. In November 2020, students started returning to school, but most senior students took turns attending regular and remote lessons. By the end of December 2020, schools were closed again (except kindergartens and first and second years of elementary schools), and by 1 March 2021, all schools, including kindergartens, were closed. After April 2021, kindergartens and the first level of elementary schools started to re-open slowly at different rates across regions. Pupils returned to schools with mandatory testing conducted twice a week at first and later once a week. At the beginning of June 2021, schools were open, and teachers and students no longer had to wear face masks.

1.3 | The present study

We expected adolescents to have a difficult time coping with the pandemic due to its highly chaotic and unstable development in the Czech Republic. Considering the presumed effects on school attendance and social isolation, we proposed the following research question:

How did the adolescents appraise the potential benefit, harm, and threat of the COVID-19 pandemic?

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants and procedure

Six online focus groups with four to six participants per group were conducted from June to September 2022. Accounting for three stages of adolescence, we carried out two focus groups with early (11–12 years), two with middle (14–15 years), and two with late (18–19 years) adolescents. Participants were recruited using nonprobability sampling methods with the help of personal contacts or through social media. Participants under 18 were primarily contacted through their parents. A total of 28 participants, 14 men, and 14 women, participated in the study. One focus group (14–15 years) consisted of three female and one male participant, while the other focus groups had a more balanced gender representation.

Before the group interview, adult participants signed a consent form. Participants younger than 18 years of age received two forms to sign, one for them and one for their parents. We employed the dual-moderator approach with two moderators in each focus group (four team members acted as moderators; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups were video-recorded and transcribed verbatim with sufficient detail. The names of the participants were changed.

2.2 | Data analysis

We analyzed the data using an inductive, semantic reflexive thematic analysis focused on realist epistemology, following the six-phase process developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Three researchers (1) familiarized themselves with the data, (2) generated initial codes consisting of labels, semantic descriptions, and researchers' interpretations, (3) created potential themes by iteratively grouping the codes, (4) reviewed the potential themes against the data, (5) defined and named the final themes, and (6) produced the write-up. Two other researchers conducted an audit

guided by the principles of consensual qualitative research to review the final themes for clarity, non-redundancy, and appropriateness (Schlosser et al., 2012). We used MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021) for data analysis. The Supplementary Materials S1 detail the positionality/biases of the authors, each phase of the thematic analysis (Table S1), an illustrative analysis example demonstrating the creation of themes (Table S2), and the number of coded segments that informed the themes and subthemes by age group (Table S3) and gender (Table S4). Importantly, the salience of each theme was contingent primarily on the codes forming a meaningful pattern that informs the research question. The number of coded segments was only auxiliary (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

3 | RESULTS

We constructed three themes to capture the appraisal of the COVID-19 pandemic from our participants' perspectives (see Figure 1 for the diagram of the themes, subthemes, and the relations among them).

3.1 | Pandemic as difficulties...

3.1.1 | Excitement at first versus difficulties right away

Several younger participants (11–15 years) perceived the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic as an adventure or a holiday due to the novelty of the situation and not having to attend school. However, the initial excitement was quickly replaced by struggling:

At first, it was good for me because, of course, I didn't have to go to school – that was exciting because we had never experienced this before. But after a couple of weeks, I started to realize that it totally... eh... sucks. Carl, male, 12y.

Other participants across all age groups experienced difficulties immediately.

3.1.2 | Isolation...

Participants, particularly 11–15 years old, felt isolated because they could not meet with their friends in person: “For me, it was horrible because I'm a bit dependent on my friends” (Felix, male, 11 years). Most participants were upset

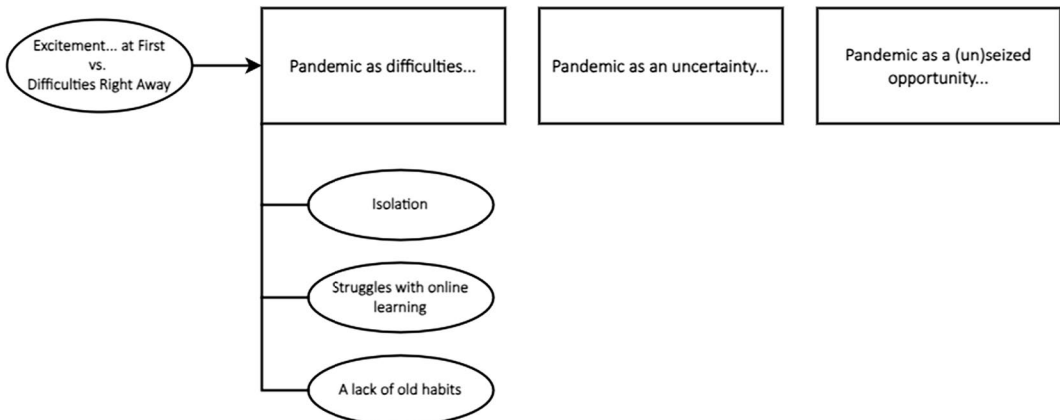


FIGURE 1 A structural diagram of themes and subthemes.

by being “stuck at home the whole time” (Johana, female, 14 years). Those who felt a sense of belonging in their class were bothered by the “terribly limited” contact with classmates (Marika, female, 15 years).

However, a few participants who described themselves as generally less sociable did not mind the lack of in-person contact: “It didn't seem that bad to me. I'm not usually very social, so when the pandemic started, I was at home anyway; that didn't change much” (Petr, male, 14 years). While isolated at home with their families, a few experienced cabin fever.

3.1.3 | Struggles with online learning...

Participants across all age groups, mainly 11–12 years, struggled with online schooling. They perceived the quality of online education as generally worse, noting they “didn't learn as much as they would normally have” (Artur, male, 12 years). Some participants emphasized falling behind at school due to problems with understanding the subject matter and sustaining attention.

3.1.4 | A lack of old habits...

Most participants in the 14–15 age group mentioned that the restrictions considerably disrupted some of their leisure activities and habits, from traveling to attending cultural events to sports. Participants felt the measures deprived them of some of the most enjoyable free time activities without which “it (life) was... how to put it... dry” (Cyril, male, 14 years).

3.2 | Pandemic as an uncertainty...

Compared to the younger participants, the 18–19 age group appraised the pandemic as a terrible uncertainty, with some expressing worries about the future. They agreed that the feeling of “nobody knowing what was going to happen” (Honza, male, 19 years) was threatening and “devastating” (Lucia, female, 18 years). The participants tried to balance the uncertainty by looking for information:

From my perspective, it was very hectic from the beginning, the information, I was not able to process at first, and it was very hard, so hard I began to feel...to think dark thoughts and had depression states, I would say. And later, when it calmed a bit, I looked for the information myself and was more informed about the situation. So I was calmer and felt better.

(Lucia, female, 18 years)

Anna (female, 18 years) described feeling depressed as the uncertainty persisted: “It looked like it wasn't heading towards an end because always when it calmed down, there was another wave out of nowhere.”

3.3 | Pandemic as a (un)seized opportunity...

Several participants from all age groups, but particularly the 18–19 years old, appraised the situation as an opportunity to make a positive change in their lives and use the time to try new activities, such as exploring nature: “One found out that one has an opportunity to do something different than sit at home and do school stuff and that the time can be used differently than the same way as always” (Ondra, male, 18 years).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Masaryk University (approval No. EKV-2019-072).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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